



Topic
History

Subtopic
Ancient History

Athenian Democracy

An Experiment for the Ages

Course Guidebook

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Athenian Democracy

An Experiment for the Ages

The democratic revolution that Athens underwent in the 5th century BC was the boldest ever undertaken in human political history. Unlike the American system of government, under which representatives are elected to Congress, the Athenian state invested total faith in the ordinary man (not woman), who was empowered to vote directly on questions of the utmost importance without any intermediary elected to represent his interests.

This meant that every citizen had the right to speak in the Assembly and vote on such momentous decisions as whether to go to war or conclude a treaty. It was what scholars call a radical democracy. It didn't flinch in its conviction that every citizen was equal to every other in having the ability, and thus the inalienable right, to determine the policy of the state.

In addition to political equality, the other pillar upon which Athenian democracy was founded was trial by jury. This established the principle upheld in the American court system today that the accused has the right to face his or her accuser and be tried by a jury of his or her peers.

This course will begin by tracing the roots of Greek democracy in the poems of Homer and explore its evolution in Athens over the course of its 300-year lifetime. We will encounter some of the most fascinating names in Greek history, including Solon, Cleisthenes, Pericles, Alcibiades, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

Throughout the course, we will also trace its echo in the American system of government and that of others elsewhere. We will also identify the reemergence of democracy in Europe over 1,000 years after the demise of the Athenian system. Particular attention will be paid to the era of Athenian history known as the Periclean age, which saw an outpouring of cultural achievement in the visual arts and in literature.

Athens's achievement in this period is all the more remarkable in light of the fact that no contemporary writer or thinker had a kind word to say about democracy, on the grounds that it placed unmerited and dangerous confidence in the ignorant and unruly masses—a view of democracy that survives to this day in certain parts of the world.

At the heart of Athenian democracy lie two profound contradictions, however. The first is that Athens was, like almost every other ancient society of which we have record, a slave society. This raises the uncomfortable question as to what extent such a bold and heroic experiment could have come to pass without the labors of slaves, since citizens required leisure to be able to discharge their political and military duties. Every citizen was expected to make himself available for public office if appointed by lot and required to serve regularly in the army.

The second contradiction is that Athens in the 5th century wielded absolute power over a large maritime empire, from whose members Athens exacted tribute. It was this tribute that enabled Athens to achieve cultural prominence. The course will give full attention to this darker side of Athenian democracy and investigate to what degree, if at all, it should be upheld as a humane and civilizing institution, a question of equal relevance to modern democratic systems of government.

Of particular note in this regard is the trial and execution of its most celebrated critic, the philosopher Socrates, which took place in the aftermath to Athens's defeat in the Peloponnesian War. We will conclude with an evaluation of democracy in the contemporary world and assess its vitality today.

Though the radical democracy of the Athenians was very different from modern, Western representative democracy in many specifics, its opposition to tyrannical oppression by either a clique or a single individual who wields unconstitutional power is an indelible characteristic of both systems. Though there is no direct line of descent from Athens's experiment with democracy to modern Western representative government, Athenian democracy justifiably continues to fascinate, amaze, and inspire all those who are interested in political history and theory. ■

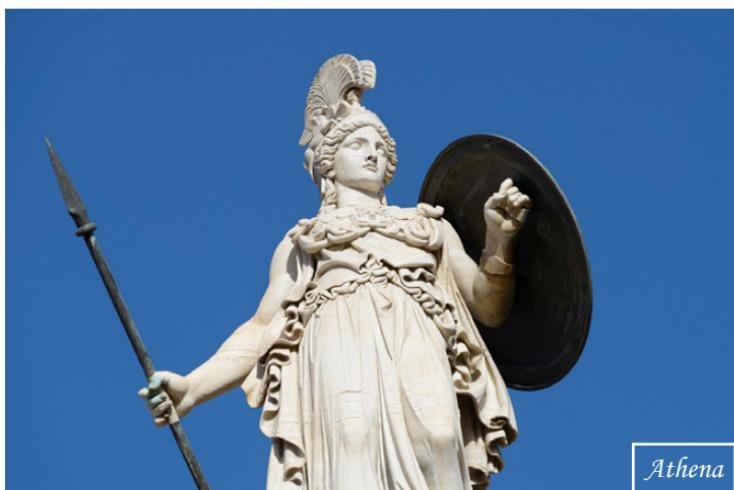
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Why Athenian Democracy Matters

The system of government that the Athenians set up over 2,500 years ago was in some sense an anticipation of modern democracies. The political ideal first appeared on the Greek mainland in the city-state of Athens, comprising perhaps 300,000 people, of whom between 30,000 to 50,000 were citizens. Athenian democracy has helped to inform discussions about America and other democracies down to the present day.

ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY CHARACTERISTICS

- ❖ Athenian democracy had both a political and a legal base. The political base was the right of direct participation in the decision-making process. The legal base was equality before the law and the right to be judged by a jury of one's peers. These were the twin pillars of Athenian democracy.
- ❖ Athenian democracy invested confidence in the ordinary, unqualified, and inexperienced male. As the Swiss historian Kurt Raflaub writes, "No [city-state] had ever dared to give all its citizens equal political rights, regardless of their descent, wealth, social standing, education, personal qualities, and any other factors that usually determined status in a community." The corollary is that no other people have ever been so politicized over such a long period.
- ❖ The Athenians didn't believe in redistribution of wealth. Their democracy wasn't anti-wealth or anti-aristocracy. However, there was some state ownership, as there still is in the United States. For instance, the Demos (the Athenian citizen body) owned Athens's very lucrative silver mines. Anyone who wished to mine there had to bid for the right to do so and pay the state the money he bid.





Athens

- ❖ Athenian democracy featured a belief in the common good. The individual was in the service of the state to a degree that would be unacceptable to any modern democracy.
- ❖ Athens featured many outlets for competitiveness. For example, there was the Assembly, attended by all citizens, where the speakers competed with one another. There were the so-called liturgies, where the wealthy competed with the wealthy in giving generously in ways that benefited the state. There were also dramatic competitions, where playwrights competed with each other for first prize, to name but three venues.
- ❖ Athens had a strong emphasis on religion. The Athenian Demos was a religious body. It funded a number of festivals. Athens itself was named for the goddess Athena.



- ❖ Democracy in Athens was the result of a process of evolution that took place over the course of nearly 300 years, from the beginning of the 6th century BC to the late 4th century BC. This evolution was largely nonviolent. Democracy was continuing to evolve right up until the moment when it was snuffed out.
- ❖ The experiment was not ideologically driven. People didn't get on bandwagons touting democracy in preference to other forms of government. In fact, aristocrats played the major role in its advancement by coopting the masses largely to further their own interests.

KEY TERMS

- ❖ The word *democracy* is by no means a straightforward term. It implies lots of things: participation in government, freedom of expression, liberty, civil rights, a civil society, equality, and self-determination.

- ❖ The word first appeared in English in 1784, when it is used in a derogatory sense, though the French word *démocratie* was already around in the mid-16th century. The adjective democratic was appropriated by the Democratic Party, which was established in the 1820s under Andrew Jackson. It had previously been used by Jefferson's Republican Party in 1798, the full title of which was the Democratic Republican Party.
- ❖ The Greek word *démokratía*, which means “people power,” is equally unstraightforward. That’s partly because *démos*, the first part of the word, can mean two very different things. It can mean either “the people as a whole” or “the majority.” The Athenian statesman Pericles offers this definition of democracy in the speech he delivers over the war dead: “Our constitution is called a *démokratia* because its administration is in the hands of the many, not of the few.”

ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY’S CENTRAL PARADOX

- ❖ From a modern perspective, Athenian democracy featured three prominent anomalies. First, Athens was a slave society. That raises a very big question: Could Athens have functioned as a democracy if it weren’t for its slaves? This was a society that promoted the idea of freedom and equality, but also believed that it was acceptable to enslave fellow humans.
- ❖ The second anomaly is that women had no political or legal identity. They couldn’t participate in the running of the state, they were not permitted to possess sizeable wealth in their own name, and they couldn’t represent themselves in court.
- ❖ Third, the Athenians ran an empire that subjugated their fellow Greeks. The Athenians taxed them, but more devastatingly, the Athenians massacred them if they refused to obey.

SOURCES

- ❖ No ancient democratic theorist has left us an explanation of what Athenian democracy sought to achieve. The Athenian democracy

didn't produce anyone like the Swiss-born French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, author of *The Social Contract*, or the English philosopher John Stuart Mill, author of *On Liberty*.

- ❖ One of our earliest sources is Solon, a political, economic, and social reformer, who wrote poetry describing in vague terms his agenda at the very beginning of the 6th century BC. Solon provides us with a small window into Athens's first steps toward becoming a democracy.
- ❖ Next was Herodotus, a historian from Halicarnassus in modern-day Turkey, who wrote in the 430s and 420s about the Greco-Persian Wars. Herodotus resided for a time in Athens, and he describes the democratic reforms associated with the Athenian politician Cleisthenes at the end of the 6th century.
- ❖ Another important source was Thucydides, often regarded as the father of history as a social science. He rejected the belief that human affairs were caused by divine intervention, as his great predecessor Herodotus had done. He covers the 460s and 450s BC very briefly and says nothing about the constitutional changes that took place at that time, but he does show democracy in action.
- ❖ When Thucydides's account breaks off in 411, it's picked up by a historian and mercenary officer called Xenophon. He wrote a work called the *Hellénika*, the title of which translates to "Greek events." The *Hellénika* continues down to the year 362.
- ❖ There's also a work called *The Old Oligarch*, a political pamphlet that pretends to justify and praise Athenian democracy by describing how it has been set up to serve the interests of the Demos. It's clear that the author actually detests the Demos and is being heavily ironic. It probably belongs to the late 5th century BC.
- ❖ Next, there's the *Constitution of the Athenians*, the *Athenaiôn Politeia*, written in the 320s. The author was probably a pupil of Aristotle. The first part of the book provides a history of Athenian democracy and the second provides a description of how it operated in latter part of the 4th century. Parts of it are useful, but some parts are not.

- ❖ Another source is the body of work called Old Comedy, specifically 11 plays by the comic dramatist Aristophanes. Old Comedy refers to comedies that were written in the last decades of the 5th century BC and the first decades of the 4th century BC. Aristophanes often provides us with insights into how democracy operated as well with political attitudes of the day because his plays are all set in the present.
- ❖ Other sources include political speeches, archaeological records, and numismatics—the study of coins. Athenian democracy depended on the wide circulation of coins. These coins, the so-called owls, came to be the widest distributed coins throughout the Greek world. They depict an owl on one side and the head of Athena on the other side. The owl was a symbol of Athena, goddess of female wisdom as well as of war.



CONTRASTS WITH MODERN WESTERN DEMOCRACY

- ❖ Athenian democracy has some notable contrasts with modern Western democracy. First, Athenian democracy was what we call direct or participatory. That is to say, all citizens participated in the political process, though in actual fact, that only amounted to 10 to 20 percent of the total population. Western liberal democracies, by contrast, are representative.
- ❖ Second, there was no party system. There were only factions. There were also loose interest groups, such as city dwellers versus country dwellers or the wealthy versus the poor.
- ❖ Third, there was no government and opposition. This meant every vote was in effect a referendum, and that people couldn't rely on party discipline to keep others in line.
- ❖ Fourth, there were no professional politicians. There were just men who got up to speak in the Assembly and whose ascendancy lasted for period of time.

- ❖ Fifth, there was no commander in chief. There was a board of 10 generals, all of equal rank and all in competition, even on the field of battle.
- ❖ Sixth, there was no accountability in the Assembly. If a person stood up and proposed something, and it turned out to be the worst possible suggestion, they wouldn't be charged because the Assembly had voted on it and the Assembly took responsibility.
- ❖ Seventh, there were no select committees and no reliance on expertise, except for the generalship (which was decided by popular vote). There were no qualifications needed for any office. This represented an astounding faith in the everyman.
- ❖ Lastly, Athenian democracy was very hard work. Being a citizen was a full-time job. People didn't just have to attend the Assembly; they also had to serve on a council for a year at a time, and there was compulsory military service.

Suggested Reading

Carey, *Democracy in Classical Athens*.

Finley, *Democracy Ancient and Modern*.

Questions to Consider

1. What should be the essential features of any democracy?
2. Can democracy be defined?

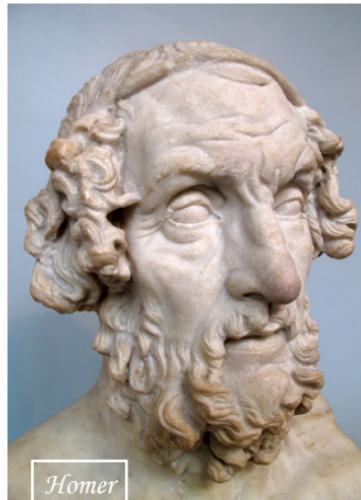
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The Origins of Greek Democracy

*A*thens wasn't the only polis or city-state that had a democracy. There were around 1,000 poleis in the Greek-speaking world, and perhaps as many as half were democracies. The other preferred system of government was oligarchy, rule by the few. In addition to democracy and oligarchy, the Greek world knew two other systems of government: tyranny and kingship. Setting those other systems aside, this lecture takes a look at early evidence of democracy in the Greek world.

EARLY EVIDENCE

- ❖ The earliest evidence of democratic institutions in the Greek world is found in the work of the epic poet Homer, dated 725–700 BC. In the *Odyssey*, it's noted that the giant Cyclopes "don't have assemblies in which advice is given." In other words, they aren't democratic.
- ❖ Both in the *Iliad* and in the *Odyssey*, we see democratic assemblies taking place. They prove that many of the features of Athenian democracy were already in place as early as the late 8th century BC.
- ❖ Homer also depicts debates occurring in a fully realized way. He puts the reader in the center of discussions. For example, at the very beginning of the *Iliad*, a wartime assembly of Greeks encamped around the walls of Troy takes place.
- ❖ The assembly has been called by the hero Achilles, the foremost fighter on the Achaean side. Note that it has not been called by Agamemnon, the commander of the Achaean army. After some debate, the assembly ends with Agamemnon relinquishing his war prize, threatening Achilles, and withdrawing from the battlefield to avoid court martial.
- ❖ It's the first example of democracy in action in Western literature, and it's not very flattering. Tempers run so high that the debate all but ends in a bloodbath. Homer had no doubt witnessed meetings that ended this way, when the stakes were very high.



THE SECOND WARTIME ASSEMBLY

- ❖ A second assembly takes place soon afterward in book 2 of the *Iliad*, when Agamemnon is testing the resolve of the army. Beforehand,



Agamemnon

he holds a meeting of his council, the equivalent of what in later times would be bodies called boules.

- ❖ Agamemnon explains to his council of senior officers that he is summoning an assembly of the Achaean army because he wants to test its resolve. He's going to suggest that they should abandon the siege of Troy and return home. He doesn't really want that outcome.
- ❖ In reality, he wants to put a proposal before the army that he hopes it will reject. It's rather like a British prime minister calling an election to see if she or he can get a bigger mandate. He summons the army and proposes retreat, but a sizable portion of the army agrees with his deceitful proposal.
- ❖ Thersites, a common soldier, gets up and says the war is pointless. He wants people to go home and get on with their lives. Making his intervention all the more striking is the fact that he's deformed. People who were deformed in ancient Greece were stigmatized. This common man nevertheless has the courage to stand up and

say what is surely on a lot of people's minds, now that Achilles has withdrawn from the fighting.

- ❖ The central character, Odysseus, threatens to whip Thersites, but in the end he settles for striking him with the council's ceremonial scepter. Homer tells us that this upset the Demos, but they laughed anyway and praised Odysseus for silencing the braggart. They evidently didn't have the guts to defend him.
- ❖ Greek democracy as envisaged by Homer is dysfunctional. It begins with an attempt to mislead, and it ends with physical violence perpetrated against a speaker. However, there's at least the hint of a challenge to aristocratic privilege because Thersites has courage and is actually speaking sense.

PEACETIME ASSEMBLY

- ❖ The *Odyssey* features a peacetime assembly. In book 2, Odysseus's son Telemachus calls an assembly to complain about his mother's suitors. There are 108 of them squatting in Odysseus's palace, importuning her to marry one of them against her will, and feasting and drinking at his expense.
- ❖ Telemachus orders heralds to pass the word to "the long-haired Achaeans," i.e., to the male population of Ithaca. They arrive the same day it seems. This gathering is held in the agora, an open space in the center of the city.
- ❖ Telemachus rises and takes his stand "in the middle of the agora." A herald hands him the ceremonial scepter, signaling that he has the floor. Telemachus gives an emotional speech about his private grievance with the suitors. He invokes the deity Zeus, under whose protection the gathering could occur, and politely requests that the suitors leave him and his mother alone.
- ❖ Eventually, Antinous, one of the suitors, gets up and starts blaming Penelope, Telemachus's mother, for refusing to choose one of the suitors as her husband. He declares that they won't leave Odysseus'



Zeus

palace till she does. He berates Telemachus and calls upon Zeus to destroy him.

- ❖ At this point, Zeus sends two eagles flying over the agora. An aged seer called Halitherses interprets the omen in Odysseus's favor, prophesying that Odysseus will one day return home.
- ❖ Another suitor called Eurymachus now rises. He belittles Halitherses, ridicules his prophecy, and urges Telemachus to persuade his mother to choose one of the suitors. Then, Telemachus rises again. He says he's given up trying to persuade the suitors to mend their ways. He requests a ship and 20 companions so he can sail to the Greek mainland to discover his father's whereabouts.
- ❖ A character called Mentor, who is actually Athena in disguise, next rises and chides the gathering for not having the courage to put the suitors in their place. Last to speak is a suitor called Leocritus, who upbraids Mentor for speaking out of turn. He then breaks up the assembly, presumably by making a motion to adjourn, which the majority accept.

- ❖ Telemachus has achieved very little, apart from taking a courageous stand and trying to right a wrong. His actions show he's becoming a man. Homer does a very fine job of putting the reader in Telemachus's sandals and showing what it must have been like addressing a powerful group for the first time, facing criticism from the old hands, and hoping that someone like Halitherses or Mentor would come to assist.

COUNCIL OF THE GODS

- ❖ The *Odyssey* also provides evidence of the fact that in addition, to assemblies, the Greeks of the late 8th and early 7th centuries BC were also familiar with how a council worked. In book 1, the gods takes their seats in Zeus's palace on Mount Olympus.
- ❖ The first to speak is Zeus, who opens the proceedings by complaining that the gods are being blamed for things they can't control—that is, human folly, which brings its own punishment. After he's had his rant, Athena speaks, asking if the gods have forgotten about the suffering of Odysseus.
- ❖ Odysseus is currently being held as a sex slave by the nymph Calypso. Athena proposes sending the messenger Hermes to order Calypso to release Odysseus. Athena manages to get her way because one of the members of the council who's opposed to her proposal, Poseidon, isn't in attendance. The method of waiting for the opposition's absence to strike is a common tactic in council settings.

CONCLUSION

- ❖ Homer's description strongly suggests that democracy had a formal structure as early as 700 BC. It's clear that he had serious reservations about democracy, but it's also striking that democratic assemblies take place at the beginning of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. It's almost as if Homer is saying: This is how Greeks do things.
- ❖ The origins of democracy are contentious. The Cambridge ancient historian Paul Cartledge points to the trend among some scholars

to dethrone the primacy of Greece as the place where democracy started. These scholars suggest that democracy had its roots in China, India, and the Middle East, and that it continued to exist in the Islamic world, in Iceland, in Venice, and in precolonial Africa, when most of Europe was in the throes of the Dark Ages.

- ❖ It's certainly true that many other societies have evinced democratic characteristics. However, it also has to be acknowledged that none, so far as scholars know, exhibited the same confidence in the common man as Greece, and specifically Athens, did.

Suggested Reading

Forrest, *The Emergence of Greek Democracy*.

Hammer, "Homer and Political Thought."

Questions to Consider

1. What do the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* teach us about Homer's opinion of democracy?
2. How do you suppose Homer's audience would have responded to Homer's picture of Greek democracy at work?

3

Solon: The Father of Democracy?

This lecture first puts Athens in context. The Greek-speaking world included communities in mainland Greece, islands of Aegean, the west coast of modern-day Turkey, the southern shore of Black Sea, northern Africa, southern Italy, coastal Sicily, southern France, and eastern Spain. After situating Athens in that world and describing it, the lecture turns to the innovator Solon.



THE WORLD OF ATHENS

- ❖ The Greek-speaking world was primarily comprised of poleis (singular: polis), populated by autonomous citizens and slaves. The conventional translation of the term *polis* is “city-state,” which isn’t very accurate, as many poleis didn’t have a city at their core.
- ❖ Physically, a polis consisted of a center, urban or otherwise, surrounded by countryside. There were about 1,000 such poleis when the Greek world was at its demographic height, each with its own law code, political system, socioeconomic structure, and religious observances. Half or more were ruled by aristocracies or oligarchies.
- ❖ The surrounding territory of Athens was Attica. The territory resembled a dangling carrot in shape and comprised about 1,000 square miles. No other polis controlled such a large area, apart from Sparta. Even so, this was a smaller territory than the state of Rhode Island.
- ❖ Athens was a highly literate society. At its demographic height, before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War in 431 BC, Athenian

citizens numbered perhaps as many as 50,000. The total population of Attica is estimated at around 200,000. It's likely that at least 100,000 of those were slaves.

BEFORE SOLON

- ❖ In the 9th century BC, Greece, including Attica, had been experiencing what scholars call a dark age. This was a period when there was very little communication, little art or architecture, and little evidence in general of civilized life.
- ❖ Things begin to change in the 8th century, when Athens provides evidence of artistic accomplishment, notably in the form of magnificent pottery. This time also provides the earliest evidence for the Greek alphabet, though very few people would have been able to read or write at this date.
- ❖ Our only written source for this period is the Aristotelian *Athenaiōn Politeia*. This was a work of the 4th century BC. It was written about 250 years later than the first move toward democracy in the time of Solon. It resembles other works by Aristotle and may have been composed by one of his pupils, but definitely not by the master himself. It's not wholly reliable.

THE ARCHON SYSTEM

- ❖ The *Athenaiōn Politeia* tells us that first there was a monarchy, then there were archons (or magistrates) who served for life, then archons who served for 10 years, and finally archons who served for just one year. The word *archon* means literally “one who rules.”
- ❖ The general picture that the *Athenaiōn Politeia* paints is probably correct: a gradual weakening of absolute power over time. In other words, the changes did not come about as a result of revolution or violent coup, but of evolution over time.
- ❖ Initially, there were only three magistrates: the *archon basileus*, *polemarchos*, and *archon eponymos*. The *archon basileus* was the

most important religious official, the polemarchos was in charge of the military, and the archon eponymos was the chief magistrate. It was he who gave his name to the year.

- ❖ We have an inscribed list of the Athenian archons dating from 682/1 BC, which is thus the first date in Athenian history. Note: The date is stylized as 682/1 because the Athenian calendar year began in midsummer rather than in winter, as the modern Western calendar year does. When scholars do have a date, it's usually expressed with a line dividing the year that precedes it from the year that follows.
- ❖ The year 682/1 is probably when the Athenian archonship was first introduced. Later, but probably still in the 7th century BC, six other archons were added to the original three. These were the *thesmothētai*, which means “those who lay down the law.” They were responsible for jurisdiction and jurisprudence.
- ❖ All the archons were drawn from ranks of the *Eupatridae*, a word that means “sons of good or noble fathers.” In other words, archons came from the aristocracy. In addition to the archons, there was the *Areopagus*. This was the council of aristocrats, which the Athenians believed had been instituted by the gods. Its exact duties are unclear, but it possessed considerable prestige.
- ❖ Finally, there was the Assembly. The Greek word for this is *Ecclesia*. It means literally “gathering of those summoned” because the Demos (the people) were summoned to the Assembly by a herald.

A FAILED COUP

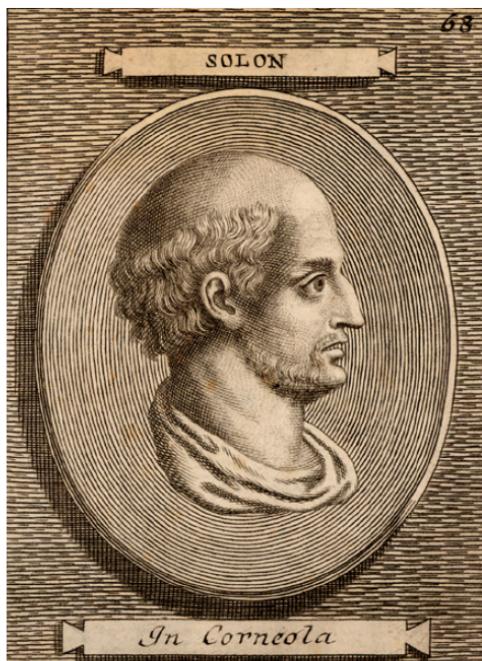
- ❖ In the late 630s or early 620s BC, a failed coup to set up a tyranny took place. It led to an eternal curse being placed on the aristocratic family that attempted the coup, known as the Alcmaeonids. The curse did not, however, prevent the family from continuing to exercise a leading role in Athenian politics.
- ❖ Pericles, the most influential politician in the period leading up to the Peloponnesian War, was an Alcmaeonid. So was Alcibiades,

who dominated Athenian politics in the second half of the Peloponnesian War.

- ❖ A few years later, in 621/0, a man called Dracon was appointed to establish a law code. This was an extremely important step along the path to democracy. It meant that the law was no longer something controlled by an elite body of aristocrats.

ENTER SOLON

- ❖ By 594/3 BC, literary sources become few and far between. Our main source are the poems of Solon the lawgiver, as he is sometimes entitled, which have survived in fragmentary form. We also have the relevant section of the *Athenaiôn Politeia* and a depiction of the life of Solon, which was written over 500 years later by the biographer Plutarch.



- ❖ Athens in this period was facing an acute economic and social crisis. The most plausible explanation is that it was the result of debt bondage—that is, Athenians falling into debt and selling themselves to their creditors, who then in effect enslaved them.
- ❖ In 594/3, Solon was appointed archon and *dialektês*, or “arbitrator.” One of his most important measures was the cancellation of debts. Solon also proscribed enslavement of Athenians by Athenians. This meant Athenians by definition were free, but it also led to slaves being imported from abroad to replace Athenian workers.
- ❖ Solon divided the citizen body into four groups according to wealth: those owning 500, 300, 200, and less than 200 *medimnoi*, or “bushels.” This division meant that Athens was no longer strictly an aristocracy. Aristocrats were still in driving seat because they were the wealthiest, but people could move up or down as they made or lost wealth. Athens, in other words, was now moving toward a timocracy, a society based on wealth rather than birth.
- ❖ The Ecclesia at the time of Solon met regularly, perhaps for the first time. Previously it had met only at bidding of a magistrate. Solon also established a court of appeal (*hêliaea*) versus the verdict of a magistrate. He also introduced a *graphê* (public action). Henceforth, “anyone who liked,” as the phrasing went, could bring a public action against anyone else. Previously, only the injured party could appeal for justice.

MORE MEASURES FROM SOLON

- ❖ It may be that Solon established a Council of 400 as a check upon the power of the Areopagus. The Athenian citizen body at this time was divided into four tribes, and, if such a council was introduced at this time, 100 representatives were now appointed from each of the tribes.
- ❖ Archons were now elected from the top two classes and subject to two important controls: First, their word was no longer the law, since there was now a court of appeal; and second, they had to take an oath before assuming office. If they didn’t keep that oath, they

could be charged and fined. Solon also codified laws—that is, he collected, organized them, and revised them.

- ❖ Solon also introduced legislation that had to do with funerals. The aim of this legislation was to set a maximum limit on all forms of ostentation that could be practiced at or after a funeral. The idea was to limit the use of funerals to promote aristocratic power and privilege for political or propagandist effect.

SOLON'S LEGACY

- ❖ To a large extent, we know about Solon because he was a poet, and much of his poetry survives. He chose poetry as the preferred vehicle of explaining his political program. In fact, he recited his poetry in public in addition to having his laws written on wooden tablets available for public consultation.
- ❖ The ancients and some modern historians regard Solon as the “father of democracy.” His poems, however, don’t indicate any intention to present himself as a democrat. He was a most unusual phenomenon in politics: a man without allegiance to any social or economic group, who genuinely spoke for the whole people and had their interests at heart.
- ❖ After introducing his reforms, Solon stepped down and went into self-imposed exile. He wanted his laws to remain in force for 100 years and evidently thought that his absence would in some way help.
- ❖ Every Athenian citizen was required to take an oath of obedience to Solon’s constitution. Even so, there was considerable political turmoil following his legislation, though the details are unclear.
- ❖ Regardless of the turmoil, Solon had a vision and put it into effect. Athens could hardly be described as a democracy at this point, but pieces of what later became democracy were beginning to fit together.

Suggested Reading

Cartledge, *Ancient Greek Political Thought in Practice*.

Mossé, "How a Political Myth Takes Shape."

Questions to Consider

1. Did Solon do anything to justify the title of father of democracy?
2. Which of Solon's reforms was most important in setting Athens on the path to democracy?

Cleisthenes the Innovator

Athens in the aftermath of the reforms of Solon was for a short period in political freefall. No elections for magistrates took place. Literary sources reveal very little about anything that happened in Athens between the period of Solon's reforms and the middle of the 6th century. That 50-year period is largely shrouded in darkness, but Solon's reforms were successful in averting a major crisis. This lecture looks at a later innovator, Cleisthenes, who played a large part in moving Athenians along the path towards democracy.

PEISTRATUS

- ❖ The aforementioned information blackout doesn't lift until a tyrant called Peistratus seizes power in 546 BC. His tyranny lasted two generations, after two attempts he made to seize power had been thwarted.
- ❖ Later Athenians didn't look upon his reign kindly, but in a sense, they got lucky in some ways. Peistratus left the structures of government intact. He didn't suspend democracy; he merely filled most important offices with his own family members and supporters. He also provided three decades of stability, and he introduced measures in support of small landowners.
- ❖ It was under his rule that Athens became the cultural leader of the Greek world. He did this in part by promoting the Panathenaea and the Great Dionysia, the two most important state festivals. This gave Athens more visibility in the Greek world.
- ❖ When Peistratus died in 527, the successor was his elder son, Hippias, who was assisted by his younger brother, Hipparchos. In 514, two young Athenians called Harmodius and Aristogeiton murdered Hipparchos. As a result, Hippias became more oppressive than he had been before. He was eventually driven out of Athens in 510.

CLEISTHENES'S RISE TO POWER

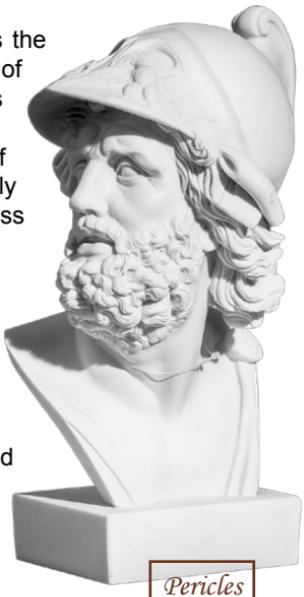
- ❖ Three years after Hippias had been driven out of Athens, a civil war was threatening to erupt. On one side were aristocrats led by Isagoras. On the other was Cleisthenes, another aristocrat of the *Alcmaeonid genos*, or "noble kin group."
- ❖ Both men, according to Herodotus, were "aiming at consolidating their political power." First, Isagoras got the upper hand, and was elected archon in 508 or 507. With help of his friend, King Cleomenes of Sparta, Isagoras drove his rival Cleisthenes into exile.

- ❖ However, the Council of 400 wouldn't accept this state of affairs. The Demos rose in revolt, with the result being a quick turnaround. In the same year, Cleisthenes retaliated by proposing a program of constitutional reform. In Herodotus's phrasing, "he added the Demos to his faction."

THE DEME SYSTEM

- ❖ We don't know if Cleisthenes held the office of archon during the period of his reforms. Regardless, the new arrangement was complicated, artificial, and wholly successful. It undermined once and for all the grip on power exercised by aristocrats through their control of the countryside.
- ❖ Cleisthenes made demes the basis of Athenian citizenship and the foundation upon which all the larger political groupings rested. A deme was a small town or village. Cleisthenes identified 139 or 140 of them, scattered throughout Attica, including in Athens. These now became the basis of loyalty to the state.
- ❖ Each deme was a distinct political unit with its own demarch (or mayor), its own assembly, its own treasury, and its own festivals. Demes varied greatly in size. The largest of them was Acharnae in northern Attica. Scholars know it was the largest because it contributed no fewer than 22 members to the Athenian Boule, or Council of 500, that Cleisthenes introduced. Another deme was so tiny that it only contributed two.
- ❖ Every deme kept a register with names of every demesman who reached the age of 18. This now became the citizen register. If a person wasn't registered in a deme, they weren't recognized as a citizen and had no citizen rights.
- ❖ A person became a demesmen, and hence a citizen, by undergoing an examination known as the *dokimasia*. If a majority of demesmen affirmed someone's parents were Athenian and they had reached the age of 18, they were enrolled. At the deme level, even the humblest citizen could play some part, expressing his views in the deme assembly.

- ❖ A person was registered in the deme as the son of their father and as a member of their deme. For example, the famous statesman Pericles would have had the full name Pericles, son of Xanthippus, of the deme Cholargos. This move was clearly intended to abolish social distinctiveness arising from names.
- ❖ Membership in one's deme now mattered more than membership in any other grouping. The older groupings continued to exist—there were still phratries, or brotherhoods—but these now lost importance. An Athenian retained his deme affiliation even if he went to live in another deme in Attica, as did all his descendants.



Pericles

THE 10 NEW TRIBES

- ❖ Cleisthenes abolished the original four ancient tribes and replaced them with 10 new ones, named after Attic heroes. Each tribe was made up of three *trittyes*, or “thirds.” There were 30 trittyes in all.
- ❖ Each trittys consisted of either coastal demes, inland demes, or urban demes. When three trittyes were put together as a tribe, the tribe had people from the coast, people from the inland region, and people from the urban area. In this way, Cleisthenes broke the aristocratic power blocs that had governed Athenian politics until then.

THE COUNCIL OF 500

- ❖ Cleisthenes instituted a Council of 500, replacing the Council of 400 that had existed previously. It was the function of the new council to prepare the agenda for the Assembly and to advise magistrates. It thus exercised considerable control over state machinery.

- ❖ Fifty councilors from each of the 10 new tribes were elected by lot. Each tribe served as an inner council for a tenth of the year in the *prytany* system. All councilors had to take oath to obey the laws and to act in the interests of Athens.
- ❖ Cleisthenes didn't do anything to curtail the powers of the aristocratic council known as the Areopagus, which continued to be filled with ex-magistrates. The Areopagus would become the focus of attack by democratic reformers 40 years later. He also left the *hēliaia*, the popular court of appeal established by Solon, alone.



SORTITION

- ❖ A principle that came to the fore in this period was appointment by lot, also known as sortition. That term comes from the Latin word *sors*, meaning "lot" or "destiny," which suggests that if a person gets chosen, it's their fate.

- ❖ This was not a new procedure. It may have been introduced by Solon for election of jurors to the *hēliaia*. Cleisthenes introduced sortition on a much greater scale, both for the election of members of the Council of 500 and for most magistrates. The exceptions were the archons and the 10 generals.
- ❖ Later on, the superintendents of Athens's water supply and naval architects were also elected by popular vote. The only positions that weren't determined by lot, in other words, were those that required expertise.

OSTRACISM

- ❖ A political safeguard that may have been introduced by Cleisthenes was ostracism. Once a year, the Demos was asked if it wished to invoke process. If it said yes, two or three months later, a reverse election took place between any number of candidates whose policies were seen to be divisive and destructive of consensus.
- ❖ If a minimum of 6,000 votes were cast in total for all candidates, the politician judged most divisive and objectionable had to leave Athens within 10 days and stay away for 10 years. After the 10 years were up, the exile could return and play a full part in democracy again.
- ❖ The initial objective of ostracism was probably to guard against any aspirant to tyranny. However, it came to be used to defuse conflict between two or more leading politicians and hence avoid civil war. In addition, it could be used as a way of venting popular anger.

CLEISTHENES: REVOLUTIONARY?

- ❖ Some scholars might say Cleisthenes was a revolutionary, but there are three arguments for supposing that he was by no means a revolutionary in the conventional sense of the word. First, there are some grounds for concluding that his main objective was to advantage his own genos, the Alcmaeonids, by exploiting general discontent in their favor.

- ❖ Second, it is doubtful whether he saw himself as introducing something akin to democracy. The key concept of his reforms was *isonomia*, or “equality under the law.” That’s essential to democracy, but by no means the same thing as democracy.
- ❖ Third, we shouldn’t think that Cleisthenes thought of his reforms unaided. He probably had help from several like-minded supporters, whose names have not been revealed to scholars by sources. One of the leading authorities on Athenian democracy, the American historian Josh Ober, believes that the key role was in part played by the Demos.
- ❖ Regardless, whether as leader or as facilitator, Cleisthenes played an invaluable part in moving Athenians along the path towards democracy. That is because his new tribal system was artificial but brilliant. It worked from the start, and there was no serious opposition to it.

Suggested Reading

Lévéque and Vidal-Naquet, *Cleisthenes the Athenian*.

Ober, “The Athenian Revolution of 508/7 BC.”

Questions to Consider

1. Was Cleisthenes a political genius?
2. In what sense can Cleisthenes be seen as a revolutionary?

5

The Nearly Bloodless Coup

This lecture focuses on a coup, a sudden and violent seizure of power that moved democracy further down the road. It took place in 462/1 BC, about 50 years after the reforms of Cleisthenes. In the interval, democracy had continued to evolve. This was the period of the Greco-Persian Wars, when the Greek world came close to being subsumed into the Persian Empire.

ATHENS VERSUS PERSIA

- ❖ Athens and Persia had first come into direct contact with one another in 499 BC, when Athens sent 20 triremes to assist the Ionian Greeks living on the coast of modern-day Turkey in their revolt against the Persian yoke. Another Greek city, Eretria, sent five ships.
- ❖ Their efforts came to naught, and a few years later, the Persians dispatched a force to punish the Athenians and the Eretrians. They burned Eretria to the ground, transporting its population to Persia to serve as slaves. However, the Athenians defeated them at the Battle of Marathon in 490.
- ❖ Regarding domestic affairs, it was in 487/6 when, for the first time, the nine archons were selected by lot, instead of being elected as before. Ostracism, too, was used for first time in this year. In 483/2, Themistocles persuaded the Athenians to use the silver from their mines in southeastern Attica to build a fleet and convert Athens into a naval power.
- ❖ The seeds for the aforementioned coup were sown in the year 480. The Persian king Xerxes had invaded Greece with a massive amphibious expeditionary force. He intended to conquer not only Athens but also the Greek mainland. However, his fleet was defeated in a battle near Salamis, an island off the coast of Attica, largely due to the Athenians.
- ❖ Before the Persians invaded Attica, the Athenian Demos took the momentous decision to evacuate the entire civilian population to places of safety outside Attica. The numbers involved are hard to estimate, but it was probably upward of 100,000 people. Eventually, they came home to a war-ruined city that they had to rebuild.

THE POSTWAR YEARS AND A TURNING POINT

- ❖ Athens alone did not defeat the Persians. Many other city-states, notably Sparta, Corinth, and Aegina, made a major contribution, but it's fair to say that the Athenian contribution was decisive. This



made it, in Athens's eyes, a victory for democracy. The Athenians had come close to annihilation, but their spirit was unbroken.

- ❖ The year 462/1 was a turning point in Athenian history and was always regarded as such by the Athenians themselves. This was when the moderate democracy of the Greco-Persian Wars was transformed into radical democracy of the ensuing Peloponnesian War.
- ❖ The Greco-Persian Wars had culminated in the invasion of Attica by Xerxes and his defeat at Salamis, followed by the defeat the year after of his commander in chief Mardonius at Plataea in central Greece.
- ❖ The author of the *Athenaiôn Politeia* tells us that a man named Ephialtes led a political attack on the *Areopagus*, charging some of its members with corruption. The *Areopagus* consisted of ex-archons. Ephialtes was allegedly assisted by a young and upcoming politician called Pericles, but we don't know in what capacity.

- ❖ Ephialtes initiated his attack on the Areopagus when an archconservative politician called Cimon was absent in Messenia. In 462/1, the Areopagus lost some of its powers, likely these: the prosecution of a magistrate for exceeding the terms of his office, the power to arrest and fine a citizen who broke the law, the right to hear cases of impeachment for treason or for causing a disaster, and the scrutiny of magistrates before and after leaving office.
- ❖ These powers were now transferred to the *hēliaia*, the court of law founded by Solon, which now took the name of the *dikastēria* (the people's jury courts). The Areopagus retained jurisdiction in homicide cases and protection of the sanctity of holy places.
- ❖ The stripping of powers from the Areopagus aroused passions because Ephialtes was assassinated shortly afterwards. His murder was the only violence sources show, though.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

- ❖ The weakening of the Areopagus was not the end of the road in the establishment of a radical democracy. Other developments moved Athens more in this direction over the following decade. Three developments in particular are notable. First, a circular building on the western side of the agora known as the Tholos was built roughly at this time. This was where the 50 *prytaneis*, the standing committee of the Council of 500, sat for one-tenth of the year. The construction of a new building can be interpreted as a signal of this body's growing importance.
- ❖ Second, in 457/6, a law was passed and attributed to Pericles, though we can't be sure whether it was entirely at his initiative. This law asserted the principle of equal eligibility and it was therefore symbolic of the increasing inclusivity of Athenian democracy.
- ❖ Third, in the 450s, possibly on Pericles' initiative, payment was introduced for jurors. This move was made possible by the tribute money that was being exacted from members of Delian League, which was under the leadership of Athens. The introduction of pay

made possible the participation of Athens's poorest citizens in the legal process.

- ❖ There are two more measures introduced in this period that suggest that the Demos was becoming more protective of its rights. First, in 451/0, the Demos voted to limit the franchise to those of citizen parentage, mother as well as father. As a result of this law, 5,000 people were allegedly struck off their deme registers and deprived of citizenship.
- ❖ Second, it may be that the *graphê paranomôn*, “the public action regarding proposals that were contrary to the laws,” was now introduced. Anyone who sought to subvert constitution by proposing that the powers of the Demos be curtailed was now liable to prosecution, though the first evidence of its use dates to 415.

CONCLUSION

- ❖ Scholars debate the question of when precisely Athens became a democracy. Cleisthenes took the major step in constituting Athens as a democracy back in 508/7, when he made the demes the basis of political and civic life and introduced the Council of 500.
- ❖ However, what Athens did in 462/1 was truly remarkable. Athens was now a direct, radical democracy. The stripping of powers from the Areopagus signaled a seismic shift. Henceforth, if a person was a member of the Demos, they were a member of the elite, regardless of background, wealth, or education.
- ❖ Yet not everything changed as the result of the radicalization of Athens's democracy. Political leaders continued to be aristocrats until the early years of the Peloponnesian War, a full generation later. It seems that the Demos continued to be mesmerized by wealth and power and privilege.
- ❖ The death of Ephialtes left Pericles as the unchallenged leader of the democratic political tendency. He would dominate Athenian politics for nearly 35 years.

Suggested Reading

Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*.

Kagan, *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why do you suppose Athens became a radical democracy with so little bloodshed?
2. How and why did Athens's passage to equal rights for all differ so strongly from the path taken by other revolutionary movements?

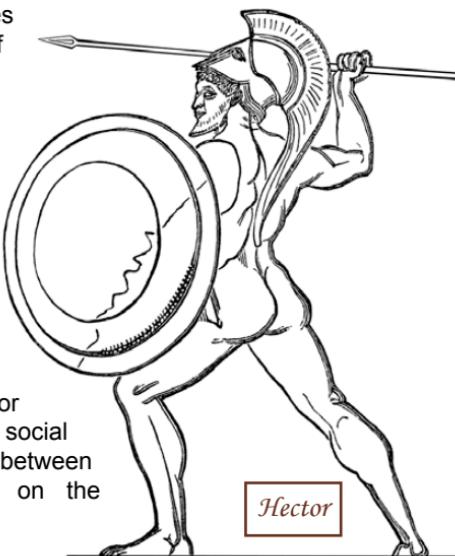
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Democracy at War

The subject of this lecture is how the Athenian democracy made war. Athens, like every polis, was an autonomous community. It had its own laws, its own social system, its own form of government, and its own military. A city-state couldn't be autonomous if it didn't have its own military. Moreover, the Greeks were constantly at war with one another, mostly about useless parcels of land or grudges whose origins were buried in the mists of time. Regardless, war was an important and frequent undertaking.

SERVICE AND HOPLITES

- ❖ The Greeks regarded military service as a privilege, and it was tied to citizenship. The Athenian military was amateur in the sense that Athenians couldn't make a career out of service in the armed forces. Every Athenian citizen served on a regular basis throughout his adult life, from age 18 to 59. There must have been a handful of exceptions—men who didn't serve because they were judged too sick or feeble—but sources don't talk about them. Slaves occasionally fought at times of crisis, but that was rare.
- ❖ An intriguing military moment occurs in the *Iliad* when the elderly Nestor pitches an idea to Agamemnon and the other Greek chiefs. The idea was to line the men up and make them fight in serried ranks. Up until then, aristocrats like Achilles and Hector went around looking for someone to fight of their own social status. Only individual combat between aristocrats has any impact on the outcome of an engagement.
- ❖ Nestor's idea anticipated the style of fighting called hoplite warfare. That's when armed warriors fight together in serried ranks in a rectangle, advancing together in lockstep. Hoplites depended on each other for protection; if one broke ranks, the formation was in trouble.
- ❖ The objective of hoplite warfare was to break through the enemy line en masse. Most battles were probably over in about an hour, and casualties were perhaps as high as about 15 percent. The birth of hoplite fighting, around 700 BC or a bit later, occurred around the same time as the birth of the concept of the citizen.



HOPLITES AND DEMOCRACY

- ❖ In the year 490, the Persian king Darius sent an invasion force to mainland Greece to punish the Athenians and the Eretrians. He wanted to punish them for sacking Sardis, a major city in Lydia, which was part of the Persian Empire. The Athenians and the Eretrians had the audacity to give help to the Ionian Greeks in their revolt from the Persians.
- ❖ It didn't do any good. The Persians were far too powerful, and they exacted terrible reprisals after they put the revolt down. They first burned Eretria to the ground. They next traveled to Attica and landed in the bay near Marathon, a coastal deme 26 miles northeast of Athens. The Athenians were greatly outnumbered but won an astounding victory, losing 192 casualties compared to 6,400 for the Persians.
- ❖ The victory, being won by an army of equals, gave democracy a boost. It was as if democracy had proven more than a match for the Persians, who were subject to a king with absolute power.

MILITARY HIERARCHY

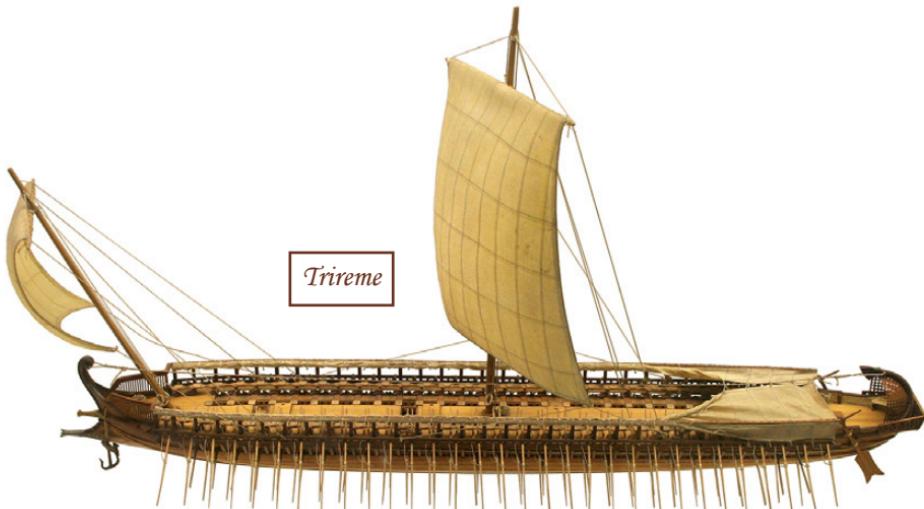
- ❖ There was no commander in chief in the Athenian army. Instead, there was a board of 10 *stratēgoi*. They were elected by popular vote because it was one of the few offices that the Athenians thought required experience and skill. All were of equal status.
- ❖ The *stratēgoi* were naval as well as army commanders. The Athenians assumed if someone was qualified to lead an army, they could also direct a fleet. Reelection to the post of *stratēgos* was permissible, and there was no limit to the number of times one could hold the post. Each of the 10 generals was elected from one of 10 tribes. After 440 BC, however, there could be two generals from the same tribe.
- ❖ The Demos often held generals accountable if their army or navy suffered a defeat. For example, the politician Pericles was deposed

from his generalship in 430 when the Peloponnesian War wasn't going well. He wasn't exiled, but he was fined heavily.

- ❖ Below the *stratēgoi* there were 10 *taxisarchoi*, squadron commanders in charge of the infantry, and 10 *phylarchoi* corresponding to cavalry officers. There wasn't, however, the elaborate hierarchy of lance corporals, corporals, lieutenants, captains, majors, and so on, as in the American military.

THE ATHENIAN NAVY

- ❖ Athens wasn't always a naval power. In 490, it had only a small fleet. That changed in 483/2, when they struck a particularly rich vein of silver at their silver mines at Lavrion in southeast Attica. The politician Themistocles cajoled Athens into building a large fleet. He did so because he sensed that the Persians would be back and that the Athenian army would not be large enough to resist them.
- ❖ The Athenians built a fleet of triremes. Triremes were warships with three banks of oars. A modern trireme known as the *Olympias* has been constructed, reproducing the specifications of the original model in authentic detail. Its cruising speed is six knots, but when it



sprints, as it would have done when ramming a Persian ship with its prow, it can achieve nine knots.

- ❖ Athens's fleet was primarily manned by the poorest citizens, the *thêtes*, who couldn't afford hoplite armor to serve in the infantry or a horse to serve in cavalry. All they needed was an oar, and that was provided by the state.
- ❖ The consequence was that the building of the fleet increased the importance of the poorest sector of Athens's population and gave it a vital role in Athens's defense. This was a vital factor in the development of democracy.
- ❖ In second half of the 5th century BC, Athens's fleet comprised 200 to 300 ships. Each ship had a crew of 200, split up between 170 rowers and 30 other personnel. Using an estimate of 200 ships, that adds up to 40,000 men in total. It wasn't only *thêtes* who served in the fleet. Metics regularly served, slaves did so at times of crisis, and mercenaries were also employed, increasingly so in the 4th century.

SALAMIS

- ❖ Two years after the silver strike in 483/2, a Persian invasion under Darius's successor Xerxes took place. The invasion wasn't focused on Athens exclusively, but Athens was the primary target. Athens's population evacuated before the incursion, with many going to the island of Salamis, less than a mile from the Attic coast.
- ❖ Largely due to the genius of Themistocles, however, the Greek coalition won a resounding naval victory in the straits of Salamis. Like Marathon, Salamis confirmed the quality of Athenian democracy. It elevated the standing of rowers, as opposed to infantry.
- ❖ Two years later, in 478, Athens became protector of the Greek world against the Persians. Athens was able to do this because its fleet was second to none and because Athens alone had the will to lead.

ATHENS AS A POWER

- ❖ Athens's rising stature played a large role in the Delian League, which was an initially free association of Greek states under leadership of Athens. It was called the Delian League because its treasury and council were centered on the sacred island of Delos in the Cyclades island group, which was the birthplace of the divine twins, Artemis and Apollo.
- ❖ The Delian League was established on democratic lines. Each member state, about 150 in all, exercised one vote in the council. Each also, according to its size, contributed ships to the common fleet.
- ❖ Within a fairly short span of time, however, Athens began to dominate the council, both because it was able to exercise leverage over the smaller states and because its allies preferred to take up the option of contributing tribute rather than ships. The Delian Confederacy eventually turned into the Athenian Empire.
- ❖ The growth of Athens as a maritime power corresponded with the construction of the dockyard and ship sheds in the peninsula that lies five miles southwest of Athens, called the Piraeus. Ultimately, the Piraeus developed into a commercial as well as naval port, as it became a center of trade in the eastern Mediterranean.
- ❖ In the 450s, it was joined to Athens by the so-called Long Walls. These were two stretches of wall that ran parallel to one another the length of the distance between Athens and the Piraeus. That was to have a profound effect on the course of the Peloponnesian War.

Suggested Reading

Hanson, "Hoplites into Democrats."

Ober, "The Rules of War in Classical Greece."

Pritchard, *War, Democracy, and Culture in Classical Athens*.

Strauss, "The Athenian Trireme, School of Democracy."

Questions to Consider

1. Should a willingness to fight for one's country be a privilege, an entitlement, or a requirement?
2. How did service in the Athenian military contribute to the success of Athens's democracy?

7

The Popular Assembly

Radical democracy was achieved in Athens in the late 460s and early 450s BC. It would continue to evolve, but the essential pieces were all in place. This lecture focuses on how the most basic piece, the Ecclesia (or Assembly), functioned.

DAY-TO-DAY FUNCTIONING

- ❖ In the 5th century BC, the Ecclesia may have met fewer than once a month, with more frequent meetings during times of war. By the 4th century BC, the group met 40 times a year. Four days' notice was usually given before the Assembly gathered, though extraordinary meetings could be called at a moment's notice. The gatherings were likely announced by heralds.
- ❖ Every freeborn citizen over the age of 20 could attend. It's likely that about 10 to 20 percent of the citizen body, or 5,000 to 6,000 people, attended the Assembly. Meetings were usually held on the Pnyx, the hill to the western side of the Acropolis.
- ❖ The Pnyx was enlarged in the 4th century BC so that it could accommodate 15,000. That's interesting because at the time, the citizen body probably comprised only 20,000 people owing to losses in the Peloponnesian War. This implies that the Athenians became more civic-minded in this time.
- ❖ However, not every Athenian was engaged. Meetings took place at dawn, and many Athenians would have to give up multiple days for travel to and from the Assembly.
- ❖ A meeting of the Assembly was a religious occasion. Before a meeting of the Assembly was declared open, sacrifices were performed, sacred water was sprinkled around the perimeter of the Pnyx, and prayers and curses were delivered. During the Greco-Persian Wars, for instance, they would have cursed the Persians.



PROTOCOL

- ❖ The meeting of the Assembly was conducted by the chairman, who determined who got the chance to speak on whatever was under discussion. It was the Council, or Boule, that published the agenda.
- ❖ Discussions became rowdy at times. Heckling and shouting were common occurrences, and the *Iliad* depicts Odysseus striking people with his staff. In Athens, Scythian archers stood by to keep order and expel any troublemakers.
- ❖ Within the Assembly, all men were equal, and anyone could speak—in theory. The chairman would open the meeting by asking who wished to speak. People seated in the back probably had no hope of catching his eye, and in practice, around 20 individuals dominated debate at any one time.
- ❖ As the historian Robin Osborne has noted, inscriptions show that the men who got up and recommended changes to proposals are mostly unknown to modern scholars. This demonstrates that active participation in political debate was not limited to career politicians.

THE ABSENCE OF EXPERTISE?

- ❖ While the Assembly often featured the common man, there was a great deal of expertise in the body. It incorporated men of diverse backgrounds, and many Athenians would have served on the Council, held magistracies, or been involved in the administrative side of democracy in some other capacity.
- ❖ Inevitably, however, there were times when the Demos was voting about matters it knew very little about. The classic instance is at the beginning of the sixth book of Thucydides's history, where the historian claims that most of those who voted for the Sicilian expedition were entirely ignorant both of the size of the island and of its population.

- ❖ There were also times when the Demos was deceived. For instance, it was deceived by ambassadors from Segesta, a city in Sicily. They wanted the Athenians to sign up for the invasion and falsely claimed to have the resources to help defray the cost of the expedition.

DEMOS DIVISIONS

- ❖ The Demos featured no official political leaders, no parties, no whips, and no political manifestoes. Broadly speaking, there were three interest groups:
 1. The oligarchs, who belonged to cavalry class.
 2. The moderates, who comprised the hoplite class.
 3. The urban proletariat or radicals, who served as rowers in the fleet.
- ❖ Even those interest groups weren't set in stone. Many Athenians voted on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes, age caused a division, too: In one account, when the Demos was debating about whether to invade Sicily, Nicias disparaged Alcibiades by claiming that he was too young to hold a command and called upon the older men to oppose his proposal to invade Sicily. Alcibiades responded by urging the young to work with the old to achieve consensus.

VOTING

- ❖ Political leadership was tested with each new proposal that came before the Assembly. Every vote was a referendum, and the Assembly reached decisions by simple majority. According to tradition, members raised their right hand to vote. Counting votes was likely very difficult.
- ❖ The Assembly had the final authority for voting for peace or war, concluding treaties, debating and deciding size of military expeditions, and so on. It could remove officials from office, and it decided whether a new god or goddess could be incorporated into

the state pantheon, as well as whether a group of foreigners could worship their own deity in private.

- ❖ However, there were also many issues it wouldn't have dreamed of debating, such as abortion or same-sex marriage. Those topics didn't come under the sensitive heading of religion, and they weren't a matter of public concern.
- ❖ The Assembly could work very quickly. For instance, it decided to mount an expedition to invade Sicily in a single meeting. Another meeting, just five days later, discussed the size of the expedition and its financing.
- ❖ After the Assembly had reached a decision, it was usually inscribed on a stone *stèle*, a rectangular block of stone that was inserted into the ground. This wasn't true for every single decision, however: The decision to go to war with the Peloponnesians in 431 BC wasn't inscribed on stone.

OTHER INPUT

- ❖ When it was having difficulty in making up its mind, the Assembly would send ambassadors to Delphi, the seat of Apollo's oracle, for advice. Oracles were often notoriously difficult to interpret, which means that the Demos would call upon the professional oracle mongers, the *chrêsmologoi*, to elucidate.
- ❖ Even so, the interpretation of the *chrêsmologoi* did not always go unchallenged. That's what happened in 481, when the Athenians received an oracle from Apollo telling them Zeus had given them "a wooden wall, that would never be destroyed." They were facing the prospect of the Persian invasion and debating what action to take.
- ❖ Herodotus, who reported the debate, tells that some of the older citizens took the wooden wall to be a thorn hedge that surrounded the Acropolis, augmented perhaps by a wooden stockade. They claimed that Apollo was therefore urging them to defend the site at all cost. This, too, was the interpretation of the *chrêsmologoi*.

A detailed marble statue of the ancient Greek historian Herodotus. He is depicted sitting on a high, curved stone pedestal, leaning forward with his left hand resting on his chin in a thoughtful pose. He is shirtless, with a heavy, draped white cloak over his left shoulder and around his legs. His right arm is bent, holding a long, unrolled scroll. The statue is set against a background of classical columns. The name "HERODOTUS" is inscribed on the base of the pedestal.

Herodotus

- ❖ Others, however, interpreted the wooden wall to mean the fleet and said that if Athens opposed the Persians by sea they would be victorious. This led to an impasse between the two sides for a time, but in the end, the Athenians won a stunning naval victory with help from other Greek states.
- ❖ Had they trusted in the wooden wall surrounding the Acropolis, history would be very different. The Athenians had the largest fleet at the time, and the Greek coalition fighting the Persians could never have won without it.

Suggested Reading

Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*.

Hansen, “The Organization of the Ekklesia.”

Questions to Consider

1. What are the dangers of entrusting a group of some 6,000 people with the authority to determine public policy?
2. To what extent do the speeches in Thucydides's accounts help us to understand the Athenian Assembly?

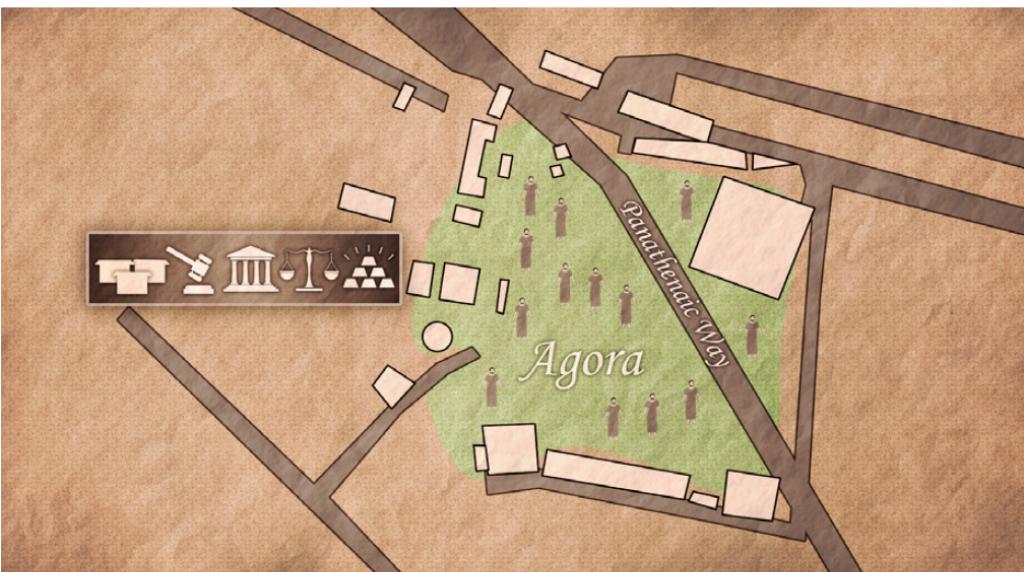
8

The Council and the Magistrates

This lecture focuses on events in the agora, the level open space to the north of the Acropolis in Athens. The agora was the civil, political, religious, legal, and commercial heart of Athens. This was where the Council met, where the archons had their offices, and where the popular courts were. It was also where Athenian citizens met in groups, randomly bumped into one another, got their news, and mulled over the burning political issues of the day.

THE COUNCIL CHAMBER

- ❖ The agora was place where the most important democratic institutions were located. The most central of these was the council chamber, or bouleuterion. It was located on the west side of the agora.
- ❖ The Athenian Boule was first constituted as the Council of 500 by Cleisthenes in 508/7. Fifty members were elected by lot from each of 10 tribes, and the minimum age requirement was 30. In any 30-year period, 7,500 citizens would serve on the council.
- ❖ Attendance wasn't compulsory for council members, so this raises the possibility that it might at times have functioned as a clique with the most politically engaged citizens taking control. Council members debated among themselves and then presented subjects in the form of an agenda to the Assembly, which had the final right of decision.
- ❖ Nothing could be discussed by the Assembly that hadn't been proposed by the Boule. The Boule presented a motion in the form



of a *probouleuma*. Sometimes the probouleuma carried the Boule's recommendation. The Boule also passed decrees in its own name on routine matters of no particular significance, when asked to do so by the Assembly.

- ❖ Each of the 10 tribes sat for one-tenth of the year as a kind of standing executive committee. This period of time was known as a *prytany* and the 50 executives were known as *prytaneis*, or "presidents." One-third of them formed a permanent sitting body, on hand to deal with emergencies.

OTHER GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

- ❖ The archons were another organ of government. The institution was at least as old as the 7th century BC. By the 5th century BC, however, archons performed tasks that were judged not to require any special qualifications or expertise. They weren't particularly powerful, though the office still carried prestige.
- ❖ The Demos was always ready to call archons to account. As a result, many of them probably felt scared to make decisions.
- ❖ Lastly, there were the six *thesmothētai*, or "lawmakers." They were in charge of the judiciary and the court system.

MINOR MAGISTRATES

- ❖ There were about 700 junior magistrates in addition to the archons. Several hundred others were responsible for the administration of the Delian League. All were appointed by lot from those who volunteered.
- ❖ A person didn't need any qualifications or experience to be appointed to any of these posts. However, a person could hold each position only once in a lifetime, and a person could hold only one position at a time. That means it was impossible to build a political career or gain influence by becoming a magistrate.

- ❖ The most important of the junior magistracies were the following:
 - ◆ The *agoranomoi*, who guaranteed the quality of goods that were on sale in the agora and kept order there.
 - ◆ The *metronomoi*, who insured goods were of proper weight and measure.
 - ◆ The *astynomoi*, who made sure dead bodies were removed from the streets and cleared away refuse.
 - ◆ The *hodopoioi*, who maintained the roads.
 - ◆ The *hieropoioi*, who supervised sacrifices.

TAXATION

- ❖ In the Athenian democratic system, wealthy and poor people weren't taxed. Only the extremely rich were taxed on a regular basis. They were required to perform liturgies, i.e., be patrons of important and expensive public programs. Examples include bearing the cost of equipping and maintaining a gymnasium and its athletes; sponsoring dramatic productions; and maintaining a trireme for a year.
- ❖ No fixed sum was laid down for a liturgy, but the assumption was that the sponsors would compete with one another to provide the best gymnasium, put on the best dramatic performance, or equip the best trireme. Anthropologists call this phenomenon conspicuous consumption.
- ❖ In addition, the state collected money by imposing a tax of two percent on imports and exports. Since a huge amount of merchandise and commodities passed through Athens's commercial port in the Piraeus, this was a very profitable source of revenue.
- ❖ Sex workers had to pay a tax on their earnings. There was also a tax on certain land whenever it was leased out. Another tax was paid

monthly by metics to reside in Athens. Finally, the Athenian state collected a great deal of money in tribute from its allies.

- ❖ The Athenians kept most of their money in a central state treasury, rather like Fort Knox. In addition, there were temple treasuries, the most important being the treasury of Athena. In time of need, the state could borrow from the temple treasuries, as it did in the Peloponnesian War.

STATE CARE

- ❖ The Athenian democracy didn't see it as its duty to care for the welfare of its citizens, though some scholars have argued that the pay that jurors received for jury service might be seen as a kind of state pension for older citizens.
- ❖ The state also took no responsibility for educating its citizens. There was no state-sponsored, public education. The wealthy would have given the job to an educated slave known as a *paidagôgos*, from which we get the word "pedagogy." Some would have sent their sons to fee-paying schools, and the poor would have been left out.
- ❖ There were two areas of state support, however. First, the orphans of those who died in the line of duty were cared for at the state's expense. State orphans received support until their 18th year.
- ❖ The second area of state support was for the disabled, who also received a modest pension. The pension was barely enough to support the recipient at the poverty level, so it was probably assumed that their family would step in.

CONCLUSION

- ❖ Athenian citizenship was a tradeoff. There were freedoms, such as the ability to criticize democracy, and there were protections, such as protection from torture. However, there were also restrictions, such as who a person could leave money to and engage in sexual

conduct with—adultery was prohibited. There were also obligations, such as military service and participating in the Boule.

- ❖ There was also a limit to freedom of speech. In particular, the Athenians weren't happy with people who denied the existence of gods, especially when they felt under threat. Athenian citizens were also expected to undertake civic, religious, and other obligations in their respective demes.

Suggested Reading

Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*.

Forsdyke, *Exile, Ostracism, and Democracy*.

Rhodes, *The Athenian Boule*.

Questions to Consider

1. What was the exact relationship between the Assembly and the Council?
2. Are there any crises in world history that might have been resolved by holding an ostracism?

9

The Citizens of Athens

Some critics of Athenian democracy argue that it wasn't truly a democracy. They point out that women and slaves weren't regarded as citizens. They also point out that the number of people living within the borders of Attica who had citizenship was no more than about one-fifth of the total population. This lecture looks at who was and wasn't a citizen in an effort to determine how representative Athenian democracy was.

DEFINING CITIZENSHIP

- ❖ Estimates of the size of the Greek citizen body vary considerably. The British scholar Peter Rhodes estimates that at its peak, there were around 60,000 citizens in 431 BC. Totaling up all the citizens, women, slaves, children, and metics, Rhodes puts the total population of Attica in 431 somewhere between 300,000 and 400,000.
- ❖ In Athens, initially, any male over the age of 18 whose father was Athenian and mother was freeborn was a citizen. That was irrespective of his mother's race. In 451/0 BC, a law was passed attributed to Pericles requiring the mother to be a freeborn Athenian as well.
- ❖ It was also very difficult to become naturalized. That's because there was no path for a metic, a resident alien, to become a citizen. If a metic man or woman married an Athenian, their children were regarded not only as foreigners but also as illegitimate, meaning they couldn't inherit.
- ❖ One of few ways a person could become an Athenian citizen was if they were a rich benefactor who gave benefaction in the form of cash or corn. Grants of citizenship became marginally more common in the 4th century BC.

RITES OF PASSAGE

- ❖ There were several steps that an Athenian male had to take before he attained citizenship. In the first year of life, the male's father or legal guardian presented him to his *phratry* ("brotherhood"), a hereditary organization comprising a number of families that traced their roots to a common ancestor. This occurred at a festival in honor of Apollo known as the Apatouria.
- ❖ The next step took place in the male's third or fourth year on the second day of a festival known as the Choes. This would have been the first occasion the male encountered his entire peer

group, known as his *hēlikiaia*. This ceremony laid the foundations for the development of civic, as opposed to family, identity.

- ❖ Around the age of 15, the male was reintroduced to his phratry, this time for formal registration. Admission was dependent on a vote from the phratry members, acknowledging his entitlement to citizenship.
- ❖ Between the ages of 18 and 20, the male was identified as an *ephēbos*, or “someone on the verge of adulthood.” Ephebes served in a separate unit in the army. From the 330s BC onward, all Athenians aged 18 to 20 undertook two years of military training.
- ❖ It’s not clear whether Athenian girls underwent rites of passage. The evidence is ambiguous. There was a festival known as the *Arkteia* that young girls participated in, but if it was intended as a rite of passage, it must have been restricted to a limited number of aristocratic girls.

WOMEN

- ❖ Women had no political rights at all because they weren’t citizens as such. That didn’t mean that women had no political influence whatsoever. It’s entirely possible that some Athenians discussed state business with their wives.
- ❖ Though some Athenian women could read, the majority probably only received education in what might be called household management. The average age at marriage was around 14 for girls, whereas a man would be in his late 20s or early 30s. The age difference would have contributed to the disparity and inequality.
- ❖ Most women couldn’t attend the symposium—that is, the drinking sessions that men indulged in, where politics would often be discussed. The only women present at such gatherings were the *hetaerae*, meaning “female companions.”



- ❖ Hetaerae were paid for their services, and though some were sex workers, others were highly educated and hired because they had opinions to offer and could hold their own in conversation with men. Precisely how hetaerae were educated is unclear. It's likely an older hetaera took a younger one under her wing.
- ❖ Just as women had no political identity, they had no legal identity, either. They couldn't serve as jurors or act as plaintiffs in a lawsuit—a male relative had to take on that role. A man could divorce his wife simply by dismissing her. If a woman wanted to divorce her husband, she had to seek the intercession of a male relative, who would represent her in court.
- ❖ Women could be priestesses, however. Female deities such as Athena were served by priestesses.
- ❖ Women had a life expectancy of 36 years, considerably less than that of men at 45 years. This was largely due to the fact that childbirth was extremely rigorous and dangerous. Scholars calculate that the average woman bore 4.3 children, of whom 2.7 survived infancy.

SLAVES

- ❖ Slaves had even less political or legal identity than women. Many Athenians owned several, and a few owned hundreds, whom they employed in industry.
- ❖ Greek slaves, unlike American slaves, couldn't be distinguished by race. The exception is Sparta, whose slaves belonged to a subjected race known as *helots*. However, many slaves were Greek, having been captured in war, and were therefore indistinguishable except by their clothing.
- ❖ Slaves participated in all kinds of occupations, such as agriculture, manufacture, commerce, construction, mining, quarrying, tutoring, and sex work. Some slaves enjoyed more freedom than others, but as the historian Moses Finley put it, this was a "continuum of unfreedom."
- ❖ Slaves worked silver mines and marble quarries in Attica, which was deadly work. Occasionally, the Demos called on slaves to serve in the army.
- ❖ It's impossible to know how many slaves existed in Athens in any period. One ancient source mentions the figure of 400,000 at one point, but this is certainly an exaggeration. However, there may have been as many as 100,000 in Athens.

METICS

- ❖ Athens had by far the largest number of resident aliens, known as metics, living within its borders of any Greek state. This course's professor estimates that just before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War in 431 BC, the total number of metics living in Attica was around 30,000.
- ❖ Metics could not buy land or inherit land in Attica. Instead, they engaged in trade, manufacture, and banking. In times of war, they were obligated to serve in infantry or navy. Their service in the navy

was critical; for example, Athens's fleet depended heavily on metic rowers. However, they were free to leave Athens during wartime if they chose.

- ❖ Each month, they paid the metic tax. This would have contributed significantly to Athens's coffers. Those who didn't pay the tax were sold into slavery.

THE DISABLED

- ❖ One other group was, if not excluded, certainly at a disadvantage when it came to exercising their rights: the disabled. A very large percentage of the Greek population was disabled. There were five main reasons for the high incidence of disability in the ancient world: childhood diseases, accidents, the low level of healthcare, injuries in battle, and more rapid aging than in modern times.
- ❖ A disabled person in Athens's democracy might have been confined to the home, kept out of sight. A very civic-minded individual might perhaps have struggled to have their voice heard and play a part in politics.
- ❖ Accounts tell of a person named Neocleides, partially sighted, who was mocked when he stood up in the Assembly. Additionally, deformed people had to deal with the highly prejudicial belief that this was a judgement from the gods.

THE EFFECTS OF DEMOCRACY

- ❖ Questions remain about Athenian democracy, such as: What was the impact of the democracy on the non-political classes? Was it better to be a slave, woman, or a disabled person under Athenian democracy than under an oligarchical system of government?
- ❖ There's no first-person evidence from either slaves or women or the disabled, so we can't know for certain. Women and the elderly seem to have had a better deal in Sparta than they did in Athens, but the

disabled in Sparta had slim chances of survival. Supposedly unfit Spartan babies were allegedly exposed and left to die.

Suggested Reading

Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder*.

Hansen, *Democracy and Demography*.

Osborne, *Athens and Athenian Democracy*.

Wood, *Peasant-Citizen and Slave*.

Questions to Consider

1. How democratic was Athenian democracy?
2. Should the Athenians be condemned outright for their exclusion of women from the political and legal spheres?

10

“The Empire You Hold Is a Tyranny”

A paradox existed at the heart of Athenian democracy. The institution depended on wealth and leisure, and thus on exploitation of others, such as slaves and fellow Greeks. This lecture looks at how Athenians, who were members of a democratic society that espoused egalitarianism, exploited their fellow Greeks.

GREECE IN ANTIQUITY

- ❖ Ancient Greece wasn't a continuous land mass, with clearly defined borders like any modern nation-state. Ancient Greece certainly included all of what is modern Greece today, though the Greeks didn't think of the inhabitants of ancient Macedonia, the region around modern-day Thessaloniki, as pure Greeks. Greeks of the 5th and 4th centuries BC, looked down at the Macedonians, at Philip II, and Alexander the Great, whom they thought of as semibarbarians.
- ❖ Greece was more than just the mainland and the surrounding islands. There were Greek settlements or colonies all over the Mediterranean, as far west as Spain, as far south as Tunisia and Egypt, as far north as the southern shore of the Black Sea, and as far east as the coast of Turkey. There were hundreds of these settlements, all separated from one another and most of them located on the coast for trading purposes.
- ❖ Even the mainland region wasn't unified. Greece has a very mountainous landscape with few large open spaces. This lent itself to the separation of communities, all of whom jealously guarded their independence from one another.

THE FOUNDATION OF THE DELIAN LEAGUE

- ❖ The Greeks were a maritime people, especially the Athenians. They acquired their fleet in 483/2, which was two or three years before the Persian invasion under King Xerxes. Five years later, in 478/7, they assumed head of a maritime alliance called the Delian League.
- ❖ Those who joined the confederacy were the cities on the islands in the Aegean, the cities on the coast of Thrace, and the cities along the coast of modern-day Turkey. There were some 200 members in all. Among the most important were Chios, Euboea, Lesbos, Naxos, Samos, and Thasos, which were all large islands in the Aegean.
- ❖ The league's members didn't have to fight on each other's behalf, but they did have to fight on Athens's. The confederacy was established



first to offer military protection to its allies against the Persians, liberate Greeks under Persian control, and seek reparations from the Persians for the damage they caused. (The Persians never paid.) The original mission of the league was one matter, but it eventually turned into the Athenian empire.

- ❖ Athens was the most powerful member, owing to its top-of-the-line fleet and ability to dominate meetings when the group met on Delos. Early on, allies found that Athens was not prepared to tolerate defection—opting out wasn't an option. The islands of Naxos and Thasos tried to secede in the early 460s, but they were besieged, defeated, and forced back into the alliance.

THE TREASURY

- ❖ The most decisive moment in the conversion of the confederacy into an empire was the transfer of its treasury from Delos to Athens in 454/3 BC. The ostensible reason for this was the failure of an expedition that the Athenians sent to Egypt in 460.

- ❖ In that year, Egypt revolted from Persia and asked for help from Athens. Athens agreed and dispatched an expedition. It was initially successful, but it ended in disaster in 454.
- ❖ The disaster was used as an excuse to transfer the treasury to Athens. The Athenians argued that Delos, a tiny exposed island in the Aegean, was now too vulnerable. Cynics would say their motives were self-interested: The defeat gave them an excuse to seize control of the treasury.
- ❖ In 450, peace was concluded with Persia. Scholars refer to it as the Peace of Callias, named for its chief Athenian negotiator. It's unclear whether there was a formal peace—sources are scarce—but regardless, relations with Persia improved.
- ❖ The Delian League continued to exist, but the reason for its establishment was gone. From that date onward, the Delian League can be more accurately defined as the Athenian empire. That's because the permanent exaction of tribute could only be justified logically so long as Athens was on a permanent war footing against Persia.
- ❖ From 449 BC onward, there were clear signs of unrest among allies. Inscriptions from this time are a huge resource for scholars. There's no evidence of payment of tribute to Athenian exchequer for the year 449/8. For the year 447/6, there is evidence of back payments and disorder.
- ❖ It was also around this time that work began on Parthenon and other building projects in Athens, paid for by tribute from the allies. This surely grated on the allies' nerves.

PEACE?

- ❖ In 446/5, a five-year truce that had been concluded with Sparta came to an end. In the same year, the Athenians were defeated on land at Coronea, northwest of Attica, by the local people called the Boeotians. The Athenians had previously forced the Boeotians to join the Delian League, and now they had to let them go.

- ❖ Henceforth, the Athenians concentrated exclusively on building a maritime empire. They entered a time of peace with the Spartans, who weren't in the least capable of challenging them at sea. As it turned out, the peace would last only 15 years. From the mid-440s onward, the Greek world became increasingly divided into two camps under leadership of Athens and Sparta.

REVOLTS

- ❖ Around 446, Euboea, the large island off the northeastern coast of Attica, revolted. The Athenians under Pericles regained control of the island and expelled the inhabitants of a major city on the island called Histiaeia. In their place, they settled 2,000 Athenian settlers.
- ❖ These settlers now owned land in Histiaeia, but they retained their Athenian citizenship. The Athenians set up a number of settlements of this sort in territories that belonged to peoples whom they had subjugated.
- ❖ This was a clever way to exercise control without actually setting up a garrison. Athens put down another rebellion, this one Persian-backed, from the island of Samos. The Athenians used brutal measures, but did not install a democracy in the aftermath. They weren't on a mission to espouse democracy as an enlightened system.

THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

- ❖ When the Peloponnesian War broke out in 431, few allies sought to revolt. The exception was the city of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos, which revolted in 428/7. This was the first time that the Athenians considered executing all the men in a city that had revolted from them.
- ❖ In 421, however, they did precisely that to Scione, a city in northern Greece. They executed all the men and enslaved the women and children. The American ancient historian Bob Connor describes it as one of the most notorious events of the war.

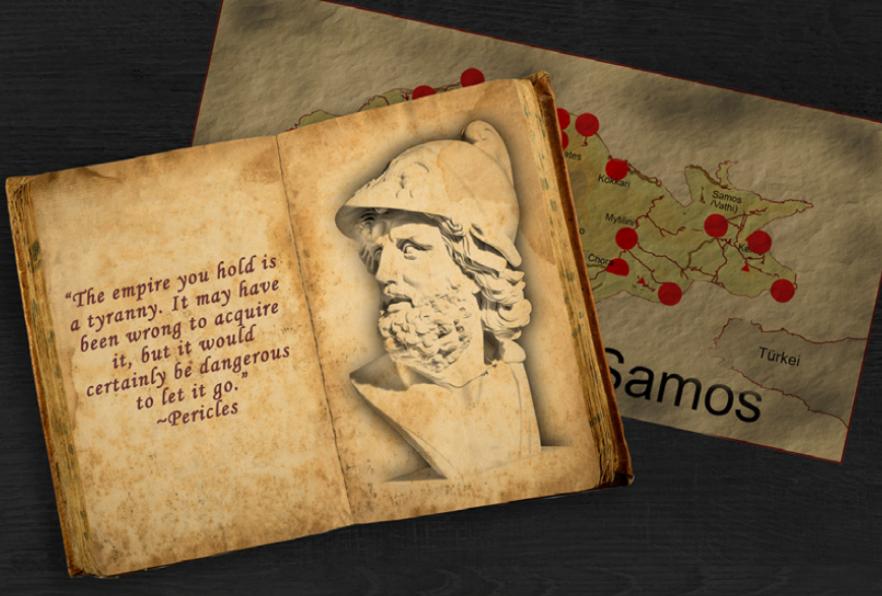
- ❖ Later, in 412, Chios and other states revolted in the wake of the calamitous defeat of the expedition the Athenians sent to conquer Sicily. The Athenian empire finally ceased to exist in 405, when the Athenians were defeated by Peloponnesians in a naval battle at Aegospotami in the Hellespont, modern-day Turkey.

BENEFITS OF EMPIRE

- ❖ Before its end, the Athenians benefited in numerous ways from their empire. First and foremost, they received massive funds in the form of tribute from their allies. They also exacted harbor dues from allies using the Piraeus dock facility. Athenian silver coinage became the chief currency in use throughout empire.
- ❖ The Athenians also imposed their own system of weights and measures by the terms of the Standards Decree. The date of this is unclear: It might have been as early as 440 or as late as 410. Additionally, the empire was source of indirect enrichment. It was a huge market for export of Athenian olive oil and high-end pottery.
- ❖ The Athenians acquired land whenever they felt justified on account of bad behavior on the part of their allies. They sent allotment holders—Athenian citizens—to occupy it. Many of them would have been poor citizens who now had the opportunity to enrich themselves.

ASSESSMENT

- ❖ The title of this lecture, “The Empire You Hold Is a Tyranny,” is a quote from the historian Thucydides. He put these words into the mouth of Pericles in 430. Pericles said to the Athenians, “The empire you hold is a tyranny. It may have been wrong to acquire it, but it would certainly be dangerous to let it go.”
- ❖ By calling the empire a tyranny, Pericles was rubbing the Athenians’ noses in the dirt. He was also correct, however, that letting it go would be dangerous. Ending an empire is never a straightforward option in geopolitics.



Suggested Reading

Low, *The Athenian Empire*.

Ma, "Did the Athenian Empire Promote Democracy?"

Questions to Consider

1. Do you agree with Thucydides's statement that it may have been wrong for Athens to have acquired an empire but that would it have been stupid for Athens to let it go?
2. Should the Athenians be condemned for running an empire?

11

The Age of Pericles

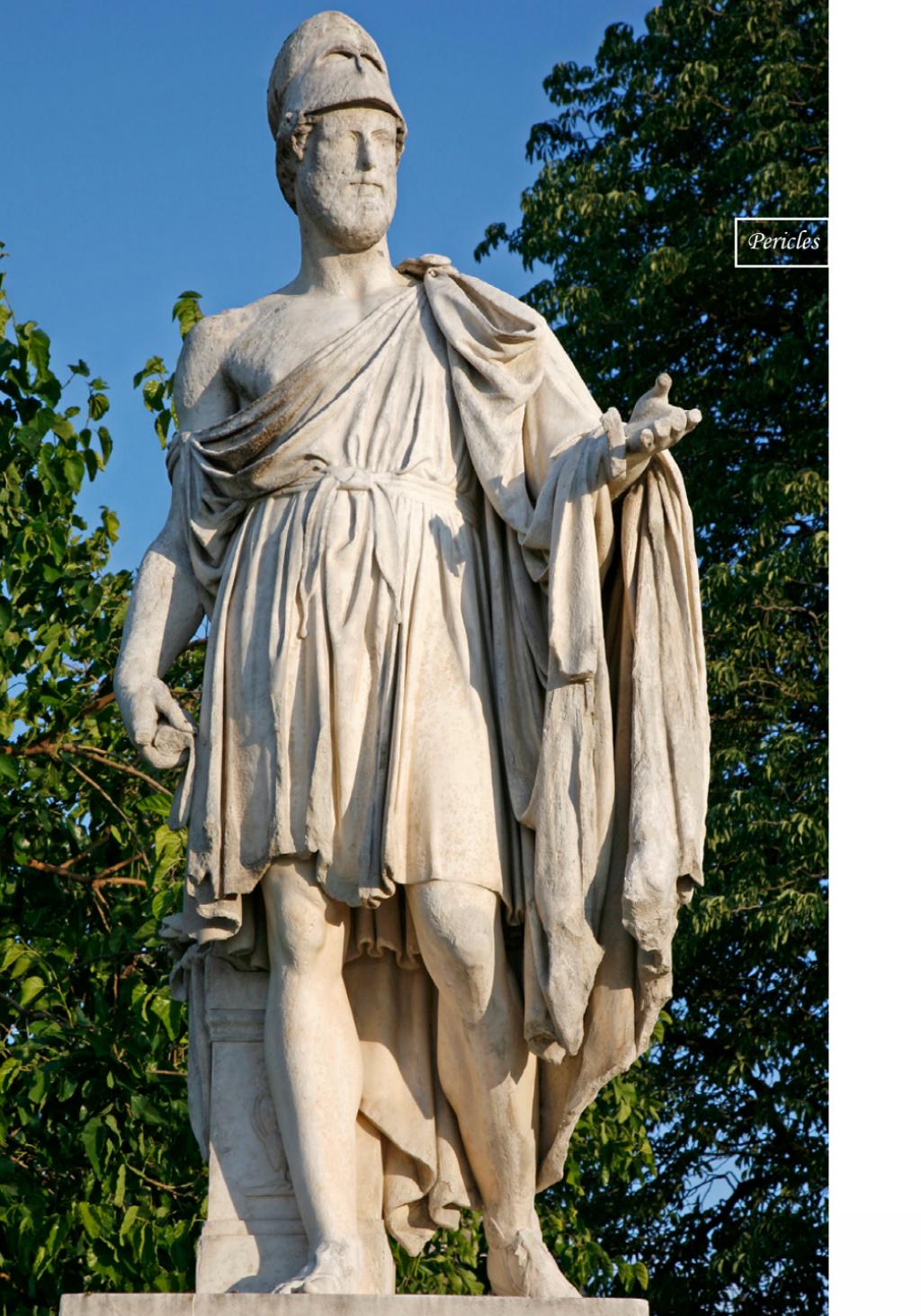
This lecture examines the career of Pericles, the leading Athenian politician in the period of 443–429 BC. It was Pericles who assisted Ephialtes in his reform of the Areopagus. It was he, too, who guided Athens toward extreme democracy. The chief sources for this lecture are the historian Thucydides, the *Athenaiôn Politeia*, and the author Plutarch.

PERICLES THE PERSON

- ❖ Pericles was an Alcmaeonid on his mother's side—that is, a member of the noble kin group that was seen as cursed. He's described as having a very large head; he may even have had a cranial deformity. Thucydides depicts him as a sober-minded and clear-thinking man who kept the mob in check.
- ❖ One of his virtues was his incorruptibility. When the Spartan king Archidamus first invaded Attica, he spared Pericles's estate, hoping to get him into trouble with the Demos by suggesting that he and Pericles were allies. Pericles responded by making a present of his estate to the people. He was also an impressive speaker.
- ❖ However, Pericles's life was not without scandal. He divorced his Athenian wife and cohabited with a woman from Miletus (in northwest Turkey) named Aspasia. She was a good conversationalist and had sound judgment, and she gave advice to Pericles. Some Athenians suspected that Aspasia manipulated Pericles for her own political ends. This suspicion was intensified when Athens went to war with Samos over a quarrel involving Miletus. The truth is unclear.

EARLY CAREER

- ❖ Pericles's career lasted from 462 to 429 BC. Following the assassination of Ephialtes, Pericles was certainly the leader of the democratic faction, but he still had a very powerful enemy in an aristocrat called Cimon. Pericles was probably the politician who introduced payment for Athenians serving on juries, perhaps as a move against Cimon, who was very wealthy and who used bribes to exercise power.
- ❖ In 451/0, a law attributed to Pericles was passed limiting citizenship to men with an Athenian mother and father. In 448, it was Pericles who recommended that the surplus tribute from the allies be used to finance the rebuilding of temples destroyed by Persians.

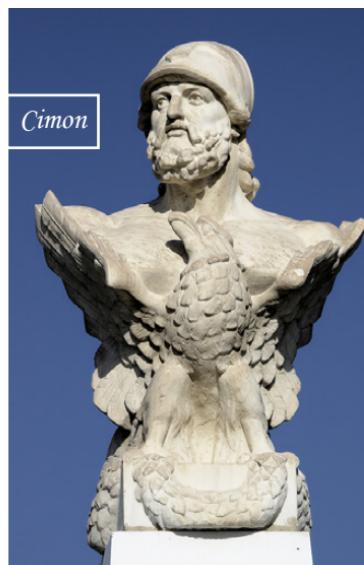
A full-length marble statue of the ancient Greek statesman Pericles. He is depicted in a frontal pose, wearing a traditional stola and himation. His right arm is bent, with his hand near his shoulder, while his left arm is extended downwards, holding a spear. The statue is set against a backdrop of green trees and a clear blue sky.

Pericles

- ❖ His opponent in this matter was a politician named Thucydides (not to be confused with the historian). Pericles prevailed and the opposing politician was ostracized. Plutarch claims Pericles went virtually unchallenged from this event to his death in 429, though that is highly debatable. He still had political enemies.

PERICLES IN POWER

- ❖ Pericles eventually became a *stratégos*—a general—and effectively was in charge of Athenian foreign policy. That policy imposed harsh terms on disaffected allies and advocated the use of allied tribute for Athens's own civic needs. It also encouraged Athenian imperial expansion. Pericles differed sharply from Cimon in this respect: Whereas Cimon was friendly to Sparta, Pericles saw Sparta as a rival to Athenian power.
- ❖ Though Pericles had no real political challenger of his stature after Thucydides was ostracized, he still had his enemies, who attacked his friends through the law courts. Pericles's friends included the sophist Protagoras, the sculptor Phidias, and the philosopher Anaxagoras.
- ❖ Phidias was the supervisor of the temple-building project that Pericles initiated. He was accused of stealing gold that was intended for a great statue. This was a clever way to get at Pericles because Phidias was a close friend of Pericles and also responsible for the project's finances.
- ❖ Phidias was acquitted, though he later became the object of attack by a decree introduced by someone named Diopeithes. He was charged with impiety and had to go into exile. The philosopher Anaxagoras suffered a similar fate.



- ❖ Aspasia, too, was accused of impiety, as well as of procuring women for Pericles's personal enjoyment. Reportedly, Pericles came to court and broke down in tears to plead for her acquittal—a successful move.

WAR

- ❖ There can be little doubt that it was Pericles's intransigence towards the Spartans that caused the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, even though, technically, it was Sparta that declared war on Athens. Pericles argued against Athens making any concessions in the dispute that Sparta had with Athens over some territorial claims. The Spartans held Pericles responsible for the war.
- ❖ There was certainly some strong opposition in Athens to going to war, but Pericles managed to override it. That's because his authority in 431, the year the war broke out, was massive.
- ❖ Pericles's strategy was essentially passive. He believed that the Athenian fleet was all-powerful and that as long as the Athenians didn't engage the Spartans on land, they would be invincible. Notably, a plague reduced Athens's population by up to a third in the early years of the war. This may have been exacerbated by Pericles's persuading Athenians to abandon the countryside and retreat inside the city's walls.

FALL, RISE, AND DEATH

- ❖ Following the invasion of Attica by the Spartans in the first year of the war, the Demos became inflamed toward Pericles. They were forced to observe their lands being ravaged and were unable to do anything about it.
- ❖ Pericles realized that the Demos was on the verge of revoking his policy of remaining inside the walls and that they wanted to engage the Peloponnesians in what he judged would lead to certain defeat. For 40 days, he refused to call a meeting of the Assembly.

- ❖ Soon after he was back in favor with the Demos, which chose him to deliver the speech over the dead who had fallen in the first year of the war. The next year, however, the Demos became even angrier with Pericles than they had been before. The Peloponnesians raided their lands for the second time. Plague was also a concern.
- ❖ The Demos tried to make peace with the Spartans, but to no avail. Pericles succeeded in dissuading the Athenians from sending ambassadors to Sparta to make peace, but they were still angry with him. The anger didn't dissipate until they removed Pericles from his post of *stratēgos*. Pericles eventually died as a result of the plague in 429.

PERICLES'S LEGACY

- ❖ After Pericles's death, the historian Thucydides writes that Athens fell under control of demagogues. He draws a line between Pericles, who was above the fray, and the demagogues, who were contemptible crowd pleasers. However, corruption had already been going on under Pericles.
- ❖ Regardless, the age of Pericles had many unique traits. It was a period of infancy for the radical democracy, when it was still reliant on aristocrats. That's to say, it was paternalistic in some ways. It was also a period when Athens took a major step towards becoming an imperial power, and in doing so, effectively enslaved other Greeks.
- ❖ During Pericles's time, classical sculpture reached its height. Sophocles, Euripides, and other literary giants were boosting Athens's cultural prominence. Like the tyrant Peisistratus before him, Pericles expanded Athens's role as a center of Greek culture. His age had a specific character, and after the outbreak of war and Pericles's death, Athens was never the same again.

Suggested Reading

De Romilly, "Pericles."

Kagan, *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy*.

_____, *Thucydides*.

Podlecki, *Pericles and His Circle*.

Vogt, "The Portrait of Pericles in Thucydides."

Questions to Consider

1. Pericles is often referred to as a statesman. Does he deserve that title?
2. Do you share Thucydides's high opinion of Pericles?

12

Public Speaking in Athens

Athenian society was much more orally based and debate oriented than modern American society. Having any kind of public identity required skill in public speaking. This lecture looks at the different venues and methods Athenians used in their public-speaking endeavors. It draws on several sources, especially the historian Thucydides, and focuses on three important debates.

OVERVIEW OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

- ❖ There were numerous venues where Athenians could show off their oratorical skills. Examples include the Assembly, the chamber of the Council, law courts, and drinking parties.
- ❖ Rhetoric was taught by the sophists. The sophists have a bad reputation, largely because Socrates was so hostile to them. He objected to them on a number of grounds. Socrates believed that philosophers should give their services for free—a nice idea but unlikely proposition.

THE MYTILENEAN DEBATE

- ❖ A notable debate took place in the early years of the Peloponnesian War, according to the account of Thucydides. Mytilene, one of Athens' allies, revolted in 428 BC. Mytilene was a polis on the island of Lesbos off the Turkish coast. It was ruled by an oligarchy, and it was one of the few allies that still contributed ships to the common fleet at this date.
- ❖ Before they revolted, the Mytileneans were promised help from the Spartans. That help never materialized, and their revolt was suppressed in 427. The Athenian Assembly met and voted to execute all the male citizens and enslave the women and children.
- ❖ A trireme was dispatched to carry out the order, but during the night, the Athenians had a change of mind. Many of them now regretted the harsh punishment they had voted, so an extraordinary second debate took place the very next day.
- ❖ A speaker named Cleon spoke first, reminding the Athenians they run a tyrannical empire and arguing for the death of the Mytileneans. Next, Diodotus rose to speak. (It may be that Diodotus was invented by Thucydides.) Diodotus argued that a full execution would discourage the region from showing loyalty in the future.
- ❖ In the end, Diodotus's arguments won out. The Assembly adopted

his reversal of their previous decision, and a second trireme was immediately dispatched to Mytilene. The rowers were promised rewards if they arrived in time to countermand the first order, which they did. Some of the Mytileneans were spared, but over 1,000 people were still executed.

THE DEBATE OF 425 BC

- ❖ Another notable debate took place in 425 BC. The Athenians were under the command of a general called Demosthenes—not to be confused with the politician by the same name of the following century. They had established a fort at Pylos, which was at the southwestern tip of the Peloponnese. They intended to use it as a base from which to raid Spartan territory.
- ❖ As soon as they learned of this, the Spartans returned from their annual invasion of Attica and landed a force on a small island opposite called Sphacteria. They intended to besiege the Athenians, but instead found themselves besieged by an Athenian fleet.



- ❖ The Spartans offered peace terms, but the Athenians, at the prompting of Cleon, refused. The siege dragged on, with the Athenians becoming demoralized as they were unable to dislodge the Spartans. A debate about this matter occurred in Athens, featuring a heated exchange between Cleon and a highly experienced general named Nicias.
- ❖ Nicias, realizing that Cleon was in a vulnerable position, volunteered to relinquish his command to this braggart, who thought it would be child's play to capture the Spartans. At first Cleon thought Nicias was joking, but Nicias kept repeating his offer.
- ❖ According to Thucydides's account, the Assembly eventually appointed Cleon general, though he had never held the office before. The Demos, if Thucydides is accurate, gave Cleon the command merely in order to reveal the shallowness of his boastfulness. Surprisingly, Cleon delivered: He captured the surviving Spartans and brought them all to Athens within 20 days.

THE SICILIAN DEBATE

- ❖ The final debate this lecture discusses took place in 415 BC, when the Athenians were considering whether to invade Sicily. It was a very bold step that ultimately resulted in a terrible defeat for Athens. The decision to send an expedition has already been voted on and agreed upon at a debate five days previously.
- ❖ The second debate, which Thucydides recorded, was ostensibly called to decide the size of the expedition. There were just two speakers. First to speak was Nicias, who had opposed the expedition in the first place. Instead of talking about the expedition's size at the second debate, he tried to convince the Athenians to change their minds and vote against the expedition altogether.
- ❖ He argued that the Athenians had been too hasty and that the Sicilian invasion would be an unwise decision because they already had nearby enemies in the Spartans. Additionally, Sicily was a long way off and would be difficult to rule even if they conquered it.

- ❖ He also launched an ill-advised *ad hominem* attack on Alcibiades, his political opponent, though he doesn't mention him by name. He tried to belittle Alcibiades by describing him as "too young to command." Nicias also told the older men not to be intimidated by the younger into voting for the expedition.
- ❖ The vote went against Nicias, which led to the question originally on the agenda—the size of the fleet—being debated. Alcibiades extolled his own public service and then refuted Nicias's claim, saying that Sicily was weak and that the Peloponnesians were no match for the Athenians. Moreover, he said that the empire must never stop expanding.
- ❖ After listening to Alcibiades, the Demos became even more eager for war. Nicias tried to deter them one last time, but failed. Thucydides wrote, "Now that most people were enthusiastic, the few that weren't were afraid of appearing unpatriotic by raising their hands in opposition, so they kept quiet." This probably wasn't the only occasion when a minority was afraid to make its opinion heard.

Suggested Reading

Finley, "Athenian Demagogues."

Hansen, "The Debate in the Ekklesia."

Hornblower, "The Speeches" in *Thucydides*.

Pelling, "Thucydides's Speeches."

Questions to Consider

1. How important is it today whether politicians are good public speakers?
2. What made a speech in the Assembly persuasive?

13

Pericles's Funeral Speech

This lecture discusses the most important ceremony performed in Athens, namely the ceremony each year honoring those who laid down their lives for their country. The ceremony was accompanied by a funeral speech (*epitaphios logos*). These events formed the *patrios nomos*, meaning the “ancestral custom.” In particular, this lecture focuses on the ceremony that occurred in 431 BC.



THE CEREMONY

- ❖ In the fall of 431 BC, Athenians commemorated the sacrifice of those who perished in first year of the Peloponnesian War. The ceremony took place on the west side of the city, just outside the city wall, in the area known as the Ceramicus. This was the foremost cemetery in Athens. The ashes of the dead to be praised were stored in 10 coffins at the ceremony.
- ❖ As Thucydides describes it, a man chosen by the Demos climbed onto a platform to deliver the eulogy on behalf of the war dead. Each year, the speech was intended to be consoling and inspirational. This year, the man chosen was Pericles.
- ❖ Pericles began by talking of the difficulty of praising the dead, even though he conceded that he must. His note of reluctance was out of keeping with the solemnity of the occasion.
- ❖ Then came the encomium of the ancestors—that is, all those who contributed to Athens's greatness. This part was very perfunctory.

After that was the encomium of the previous generation, whom Pericles singles out for more praise than the ancestors.

- ❖ The next part was by no means traditional. Instead of praising the dead in the coffins before him, Pericles offered an encomium of the Athenian way of life and of its constitution (alternately known as its *politeia*). After this long middle section, there followed a short section in which Pericles finally offered a few words in praise of the dead. This part seemed platitudinous and not heartfelt.
- ❖ Finally, Pericles turned to address the living. He told them they must become “lovers of Athens” so that they will be ready to give their lives, too. He also addressed various sections of his audience. First, he comforted the parents of the dead, urging those who are still young to have more children.
- ❖ Next, he urged those who were past childbearing years to take pride in the fame of their departed sons. Then, he had a few words for the sons and brothers of the dead. Lastly, and notoriously, he offered a few words of advice to the widows of the war dead. He advised they were at their best when they were socially invisible.

THE TRUTH

- ❖ Thucydides’s account of Pericles’s speech raises multiple questions, the first of which is: How accurate is Thucydides’s description of the speech? It’s likely he was there to hear the speech; however, no Greek or Roman historian held himself to the same accuracy standard as their modern counterparts at least try to do. Thucydides also introduced his description in a way that opened the window for a certain degree of inventiveness.
- ❖ Another question is this: How accurate and truthful was the picture of Athenian democracy that Pericles painted? His speech offered an idealized portrait of democratic Athens, one meant to contrast Athens with the enemy Spartans.
- ❖ Some of the claims he made are true, but others were lies. Among the truthful claims were that Athens provided cultural boosts through

activities like games, which was true: Athens was the cultural capital of the world.

- ❖ Another true claim was that Athens was open to the world. It had the largest population of foreigners living in its midst of any Greek city. Pericles also praised Athens's deserved status as a trading hub, and rightfully cited Athens's high expectations of civic participation. Finally, he cited Athenian empire building, which caused havoc but also boosted Athens's power.

THE FALSEHOODS

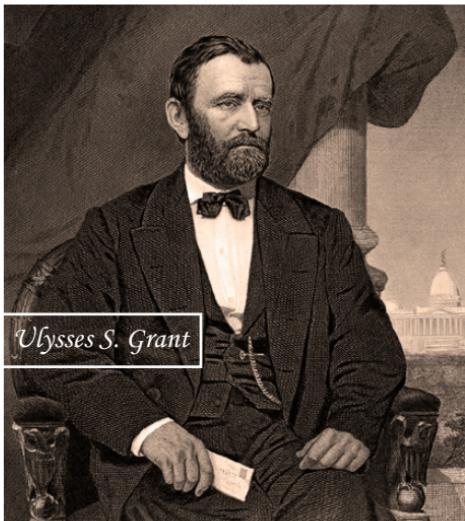
- ❖ Pericles's address also stretched the truth in some instances. Take, for example, his claim about poverty: He claimed that lowliness of social status never prevented Athenians from contributing to the state. That's certainly not true if Pericles meant that anyone could get the ear of the speaker in the Assembly, for instance. However, the statement was true in the sense that anyone, whatever their socioeconomic status, could for instance be a member of the Boule.
- ❖ Second, Pericles claimed Athens did good deeds out of faith in their liberal values. Athens did do some good deeds, but they were also self-interested.
- ❖ Pericles also made some unverifiable claims. One was that Athenians stayed out of their neighbors' affairs, but this can't be proven. Another claim that likewise can't be proven was that Athenians obeyed the law out of respect for the laws and those in power. It's impossible to know why people actually obey laws.

BURYING THE WAR DEAD

- ❖ The custom of returning the fallen from the battlefield has not been observed throughout history. Scholars cannot even assume that all Greek city-states prioritized it in the same way the Athenians did.
- ❖ Throughout history, the war dead have, for the most part, been buried in hastily dug pits or trenches on the battlefield, no doubt with

the minimum of ceremony. In America, the Civil War that changed all that.

- ❖ General Ulysses S. Grant wrote after the Battle of Shiloh, a particularly bloody battle fought in 1862 in Tennessee, that, “It would have been possible to walk across the clearing, in any direction, stepping only on dead bodies, without a foot touching the ground.” For the first time, images of the war dead appeared in newspapers, and this horrified people.
- ❖ Abraham Lincoln authorized the creation of national cemeteries to bury the dead. Arlington National Cemetery was established on Robert E. Lee’s estate near Washington DC.
- ❖ In the two World Wars, however, it was impossible to return the bodies of the war dead. There were far too many of them: over 116,000 in World War I and over 292,000 in World War II. They were buried on the battlefield. However, in the Korean War and Vietnam War, the remains of the dead were mostly returned home.
- ❖ Americans differ from the Athenians in certain ways when it comes to honoring those who die at war. Rather than commemorating all of a single year’s deceased, Americans recognize all of their war dead on a single day: Memorial Day, at the end of May.
- ❖ There is also no single speech to honor them. The last time such a speech was delivered was at Gettysburg in November 1863, four months after the Union victory over the Confederates.





- ❖ That was when Edward Everett, the most distinguished orator of his day, delivered a two-hour oration in which he compared the Battle of Gettysburg to the one fought at Marathon. However, the most remembered part of this event is Abraham Lincoln's dedicatory remarks, which ended with the resolution that "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."
- ❖ The American historian Garry Wills has noted a number of parallels between Pericles's speech and Lincoln's, including the commitment to democracy and the urging of survivors to carry on the struggle.
- ❖ Americans also celebrate all those who served in the military on Veterans Day. The Athenians didn't have any equivalent ceremony because they all served.

SUMMARY

- ❖ Pericles's funeral speech is a rousing read. There's no other passage documenting the supposed benefits and virtues of democracy that is more uplifting and inspirational. If Pericles said anything remotely

resembling the words that Thucydides put into his mouth, it was likely an incredible speech. It would have been very different from the general run-of-the-mill patriotic drivel that most orators delivered on this occasion.

- ❖ Pericles was, in essence, celebrating and trumpeting Athens. Though much of the description is imaginary, one cannot help but read the speech and think they'd love to live in a society like the one Pericles described.
- ❖ However, Thucydides and Pericles surely knew that the real Athens was very different from the portrait they painted. Under the pressures of disease, war, and internal stress, communal values disintegrated, respect for the law crumbled, and a very different side of man—the political animal—eventually emerged.

Suggested Reading

Christ, *The Limits of Altruism in Democratic Athens*.

Ziolkowski, *Thucydides and the Tradition of Funeral Speeches at Athens*.

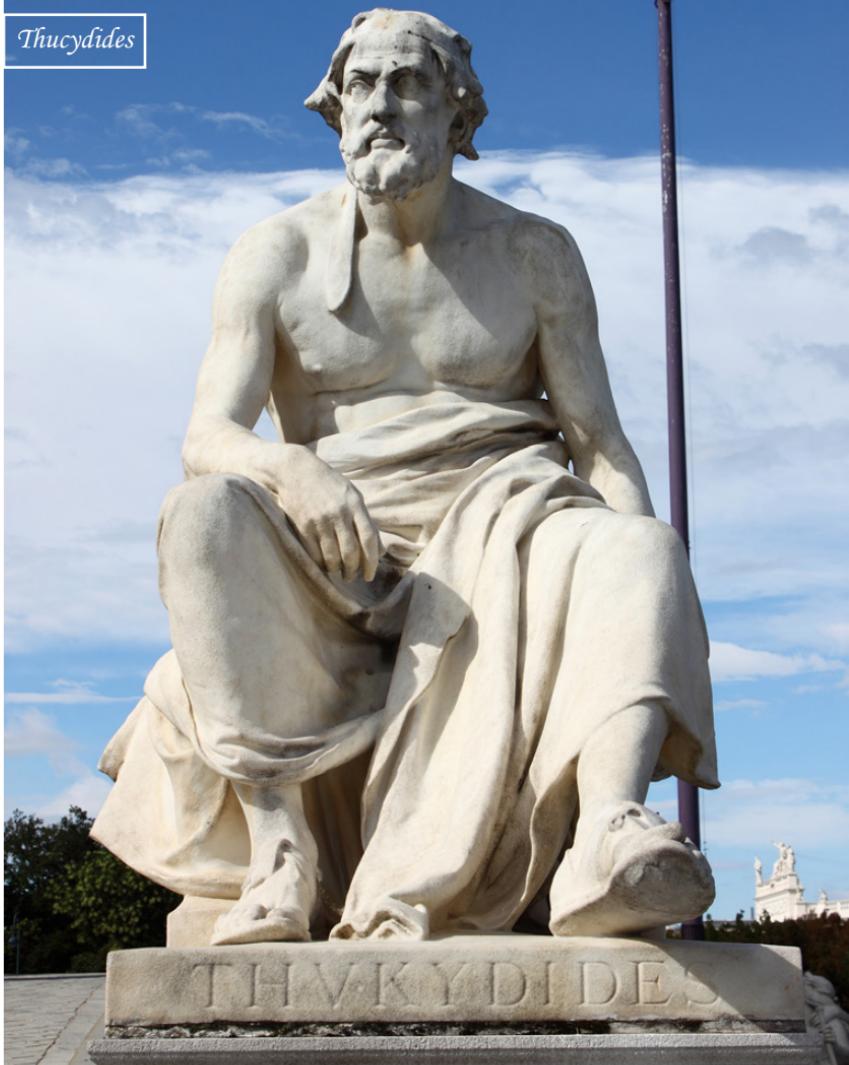
Questions to Consider

1. Is Pericles's funeral speech merely an exercise in Athenian self-promotion?
2. Do you find Pericles's funeral speech moving, inspiring, verbose, pompous, or mendacious?

Democracy under Duress

Throughout its history, there were moments when the Athenian democracy behaved admirably. However, there were other moments when democracy did not bring out the best in people. Human nature was primarily at fault—not democracy in and of itself—but nevertheless, this lecture looks at some of those darker moments.

Thucydides



MIGRATION TO THE CITY

- ❖ This lecture begins by looking at how the Athenians conducted themselves in the wake of a terrible outbreak of plague during the Peloponnesian War. In October or November of 431 BC, the Peloponnesians and the Athenians suspend hostilities. Everyone, except those involved in sieges, went back home, as was the norm in the Greek world at the end of the fighting season.
- ❖ Earlier, the Athenians had abandoned the countryside. This means that around 50,000 to 100,000 people had decamped to Athens and were living in extremely unhygienic conditions during the hottest months of the year—that is, April to September. Thucydides, the sole source for this event, didn't record how the refugees lived.
- ❖ When the refugees returned to their homes in the fall of 431, the urban areas would have been littered with filth. Athens, in other words, had become a giant slum. It's doubtful the Demos made any attempt to clean the mess up.

THE PLAGUE

- ❖ In the spring of the second year of the war, 430 BC, the cycle began again. The refugees returned, living in conditions that were even worse than they had been before. In the summer, according to Thucydides, the Spartans and their allied forces invaded Attica. Soon after, a plague broke out.
- ❖ Most likely, this plague was caused by Athens's water supply becoming polluted, especially in the port of Piraeus, which had no streams and which depended on reservoirs that caught rainwater. Thucydides described the plague as terribly damaging—it had devastating psychological effects and damaged Athens's self-image as a great city.
- ❖ There had been plagues before, but this one was different in its ferocity. Neither medical intervention nor appeal to the gods had any effect. As for the identity of the plague itself, that is unknown, though

scholars have made various suggestions. The leading contenders are typhoid, typhus, and viral hemorrhagic fever.

- ❖ Thucydides reported that so many people died of the plague that the living were no longer adequate to conduct proper ceremonies on behalf of the dead. Sanctuaries became full of dead bodies. Lawlessness prevailed.
- ❖ It may be tempting to view this event as a rebuke of democracy, but it's not clear that was Thucydides's intent at all. No matter what form of government had been in power when the plague broke out, it would have been quite incapable of responding to the challenge in a coherent and organized manner. The society was overwhelmed.

CIVIL WAR IN DEMOCRATIC CORCYRA

- ❖ A second example of democracy under duress occurred on the island of Corcyra, which is modern-day Corfu, off the northwest coast of Greece. In 427 BC, civil strife occurred there. Corcyra was a democracy, just like Athens, in that year.
- ❖ The civil strife in Corcyra was prompted by the pressure of war upon the political, economic, and social fabric. A similar situation occurred elsewhere during the course of the Peloponnesian War whenever the pressure became unendurable, as Thucydides noted.
- ❖ The democratic faction was in power on Corcyra, but there deep divisions between it and the oligarchic faction. Four years of war had exacerbated these divisions. In 427 BC, the minority oligarchic faction sought to bring in the Peloponnesians in the hope of detaching Corcyra from the Delian League and its alliance with Athens.
- ❖ In response, the democratic faction called upon the Athenians to repel the oligarchs, so that it could maintain its power. Under the influence of hatred and fear, both sides committed acts of atrocity. The oligarchs burst into a meeting of the Council and killed councilors and private individuals, some 60 in all. The democratic faction responded by committing equal atrocities.



- ❖ Thucydides recounted fathers killing their sons and people being walled up and left to die in the temple of Dionysus. This strife was also used as a pretext for people to settle private vendettas. However, Thucydides didn't use the example as an indictment of democracy. On the contrary, he uses it to indict humanity.

CONCLUSION

- ❖ It's important to note that the incidents discussed in this lecture are not signifiers of what happens specifically to democracy under duress. Any society operating under any system of government is likely to crack when facing duress. Democracy is always an experiment in restraint, civic mindedness, tolerance, obedience to the law, and respect for tradition.
- ❖ The Athenians were completely unprepared for the plague. At some level, even though their understanding of infection was very minimal, they must have known that hosting the rural population was to blame. Thucydides didn't mention any hostility between the

rural and urban populations, but tensions must have existed and occasionally erupted into violence.

- ❖ To an extent, the people continued to act with restraint. They held Pericles chiefly responsible for their woes, but they didn't execute him. They merely stripped him of his office of general and fined him. That can be called civilized.
- ❖ The civil war on Corcyra was far more horrific. It was not, however, the sole responsibility of the democratic government. The oligarchs also played their part, and if the situation had been reversed, it is very likely that they would have committed crimes of equal enormity.

Suggested Reading

Connor, *Thucydides* (book 3).

Price, *Thucydides and Internal War*.

Questions to Consider

1. What specific weaknesses did Greek democracy manifest at times of crisis?
2. Is Thucydides's description of the plague a condemnation of democracy?

15

The Culture of Athenian Democracy

The culture of Athenian democracy is a very broad topic. Culture encompasses both artistic achievement and, more vaguely, collective behavior as the result of training, education, and other forms of social intercourse. This lecture examines Athenian democratic culture in both senses.

THE PERICLEAN BUILDING PROGRAM

- ❖ The first topic of this lecture is the public buildings that Athens erected in the second half of the 5th century BC. These demonstrate not only exquisite artistic taste but also the highest level of civic pride with respect to religion and the celebration of the gods.
- ❖ Pericles, in 448 BC, persuaded Athenians to devote surplus funds to restoring the Acropolis to the glory it had attained before the Persians burned its temples to the ground. The Acropolis still dominates modern-day Athens. In its heyday, it would have been a dazzling polychrome experience.
- ❖ Originally, the Acropolis had been a defensive rock. It had served as a bulwark at the time of the Persian invasion. One of its buildings, the Propylaea, recalled the era when the Acropolis was defensible. It partially obscured the Parthenon, the temple of Athena Parthenos, until visitors passed through its gates to the other side.

THE PARTHENON

- ❖ The Parthenon is the preeminent symbol of the Periclean age. It stands on southern edge of the artificially leveled platform on top of the Acropolis. It features fluted columns, and all of its lines have a subtle curve. Around the four sides of the exterior wall runs a continuous frieze. The most famous part of the frieze is the cavalcade, which shows naked horsemen riding as many as six abreast.
- ❖ The culminating moment on the frieze, directly above the temple door, is one of deep reverence. It seems to be the removal or replacement of the *peplos*, a woolen garment worn by women that covered the sacred statue of Athena. This ceremony was the culminating act performed at the Panathenaea festival. It's Athena's birthday gift, in other words, because the Panathenaea takes place on her birthday.
- ❖ The Parthenon also features two pediments, the triangular spaces on the short ends of the temple above the columns. The one on the



west end depicts the contest for the land of Attica between Athena and the sea god Poseidon. The pediment on the east end of the temple depicts the birth of Athena out of the head of Zeus.

- ❖ Underneath the pediments are rectangular carved blocks known as metopes, depicting a battle between Lapiths, a legendary Greek people, and centaurs. The Lapiths are stand-ins for the Athenians, whereas the centaurs—half-horse, half-man—are stand-ins for the Persians, who were famous for their mounted archers.
- ❖ The east chamber of the Parthenon housed a colossal 40-foot-high statue of Athena carved by Phidias, Pericles's friend and the greatest sculptor of his day. The sculpture was covered in gold and ivory.

REPATRIATION

- ❖ Note that most of the sculptures of the Parthenon aren't on the Parthenon today. Most were removed by Lord Elgin, a Scottish lord, in 1801. He eventually sold them to the British Museum for a loss in 1816. Elgin bought them from the Ottoman Turks.
- ❖ The Greeks, unsurprisingly, say the Ottomans didn't have the right to sell the sculptures and claim that they should be returned to their homeland—a practice known as repatriation.
- ❖ The Greek demand for repatriation has been made more urgent by the building of the Acropolis Museum, which opened to the public in 2009. It has been designed to hold objects found on the Acropolis dating from the Bronze Age through to the Byzantine period. Note that it isn't just the British Museum that is under pressure: The Louvre and other national museums also have pieces of sculpture from the Parthenon.
- ❖ The strongest argument against repatriation is that if the Elgin sculptures were returned to Greece, this would open the floodgates for the return of priceless artifacts from all over the world. Museums across the world would be in trouble. Advocates for the return of the Elgin sculptures claim that it wouldn't set a precedent, so this is a complicated issue.

PRIVATE SQUALOR

- ❖ One might expect that the standard of living in Athens would have been comparably high as a result of the tribute from the empire and proceeds from silver mines. Archaeology suggests this was far from being the case, however. What little survives of the residential quarters of Athens shows rudimentary housing, clear evidence that most Athenians lived very frugal lives.
- ❖ Despite the grandeur of its public buildings, Athens was very much like a country town rather than a bustling metropolis. It had virtually

no civic amenities. There was no street lighting, no police force, no fire brigade, and no hospitals. The road system was rudimentary.

- ❖ Individual households were responsible for the disposal of their own waste. Water was available at public fountains but not in private houses.

LITERACY

- ❖ Even though there was no public education system, Athens was probably the most literate city-state in the Greek world. The functioning of Athenian democracy depended on a certain basic literacy—reading more than writing—among a majority of the population.
- ❖ The agenda for the Assembly, notices about forthcoming military campaigns, laws, and so on were promulgated. The place to catch up with the latest doings of the democracy was in the city's agora.



- ❖ There was also a lot of literature available to read. Poets from Homer onward produced work, as did playwrights and philosophers. Herodotus and Thucydides also produced works of history.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

- ❖ The Athenian empire made the rich wealthier, but the great majority of Athenian citizens remained poor. There was no real middle class. State pay enabled the poor to live at leisure, but only frugally.
- ❖ Some scholars argue that state pay supported an idle mob, which in turn sapped the moral fiber of the population. However, there isn't much evidence for this: Being an Athenian rower or peasant must have been hard work.

LACK OF RESPECT

- ❖ Democracies are always more likely to have discipline problems than authoritarian totalitarians or even oligarchies. For example, juvenile delinquency was clearly a problem in Athens.
- ❖ Scholars have a record of a fascinating example of juvenile delinquency. It's preserved in a speech written by Demosthenes on behalf of the injured party, dating to the middle of the 4th century BC.
- ❖ A man called Ariston was walking home at night when he was set upon by a young man and his father. There was a history of bad feeling between the two families. The father-and-son duo beat and taunted Ariston. Scholars don't know what the incidence of juvenile delinquency was in Athens due to a lack of records, but it was likely higher than it was in Sparta, which was a much more conservative society.
- ❖ There's also evidence to suggest that the Athenians were less respectful of their elders than the Spartans. However, in Athens, as in many Greek cities, there existed a law protecting parents. This law placed sons under an obligation not to beat their parents and to care for them in old age.

Suggested Reading

Anderson, *The Athenian Experiment*.

Herman, *Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do democracy and culture interact?
2. How comfortable and at ease would you have felt living under Athenian democracy?

16

Political Leadership in Athens

This lecture focuses on those Athenians who got up and spoke and dominated the Assembly. Though in theory every citizen was entitled to voice his opinion, in reality, the ability to do so in a gathering of some 5,000 to 6,000 people would have been limited to only a few. Of particular focus in this lecture are two of the most striking figures in the 5th century BC: Cleon and Alcibiades. They were very different from each other, and their careers raise important questions about the relationship between a democracy and its leaders.

THE LIFE OF A POLITICIAN

- ❖ Athenian politicians didn't receive any direct pay. They occupied an entirely unofficial position and status. They needed to be wealthy, or at least of the leisured class, because that would have bought visibility and support. Note: They could still receive gifts.
- ❖ Self-confidence was a critical quality for Athenian politicians. Public speaking was a necessary skill as well. Though they didn't receive pay directly, politicians could gain glory and something close to celebrity through their work in the Assembly.
- ❖ On the negative side, it was a dangerous business being a politician. There was always a distinct possibility that a politician could be fined, exiled, ostracized, or even—conceivably—condemned to death by the Demos. In addition, there was the constant threat of politically motivated lawsuits.
- ❖ The politician who did least to court celebrity status was probably Pericles, although he seems to have had a natural flair for attracting attention. From 448–429 BC, Pericles dominated Athens.
- ❖ Pericles was an aristocrat, and his ascendancy is a strong indication of the profoundly conservative nature of Athenian society at this time. Thirty years would pass after the implementation of radical democracy before there emerged a leader who broke the aristocrats' monopoly on power.
- ❖ After Pericles's generation passed away, a new breed of Athenian politicians emerged. These men were well off but did not come from the aristocracy, with the exception of Alcibiades.

CLEON

- ❖ Cleon, who came to prominence immediately after the death of Pericles, was a tanner. His successor Cleophon was a lyre maker. Both were wealthy, and neither of them was working class. Their wealth was based on commerce rather than land, and that made all

the difference in the eyes of conservatives. There was an enormous prejudice in both Greece and Rome in favor of wealth that was derived from land ownership.

- ❖ Cleon in particular suffered from an extremely bad press. Thucydides, for example, detested him on ideological grounds and because of a personal grudge. Cleon had moved to exile Thucydides as a scapegoat for a military blunder.
- ❖ Thucydides characterized Cleon's boast that he could defeat the Spartans in 20 days as "mad," and yet that is exactly what Cleon did. Of course, Thucydides gave him no credit for the victory, but the Athenians later award him the highest honors in the state.
- ❖ The comic dramatist Aristophanes also mocked Cleon in his play *Babylonians*. As a result, he was attacked and perhaps prosecuted, by Cleon. Aristophanes portrayed Cleon as greedy, self-interested, and manipulative—traits many politicians possess to some degree.
- ❖ All in all, it's virtually impossible to judge Cleon objectively owing to the extremely hostile testimony. He should, however, be given a lot of credit for the victory at Sphacteria, as well as for having raised pay for jurors. Cleon exercised more authority and enjoyed more prestige than any of his contemporaries.

ALCIBIADES

- ❖ Alcibiades, who lived a generation later than Cleon, seemingly sought visibility purely for the sake of visibility. His goal, in other words, was celebrity. He was very charismatic and good looking.
- ❖ He earned fame and resentment by winning the four-horse chariot race at Olympia. He wasn't the charioteer. Rather, he was the owner, and the owners took the prize. In fact, he won first, second, and third place in a single event.
- ❖ Around 417 BC, just as Alcibiades was first becoming prominent politically, a politician called Hyperbolus tried to have him ostracized.



However, Alcibiades and Nicias joined forces and succeeded in having Hyperbolus ostracized instead. That was the last time the Athenians resorted to ostracism.

- ❖ Later, Alcibiades entered a debate with Nicias about whether to invade Sicily. Alcibiades, who strongly supported the invasion, interpreted Nicias's opposition as an attack on him and other young people of his generation. This deflection allowed him to outmaneuver Nicias.
- ❖ Alcibiades did everything he could to attract attention, whether it was favorable or unfavorable. For example, he decorated his shield with the unwarlike Eros, the god of love. He also struck his future father-in-law, and he dragged his wife by the hair from court one day when she tried to sue him for divorce. He got away with all of this because he was an aristocrat.
- ❖ Eventually, he was forced to flee abroad for his alleged role in profaning the Eleusinian Mysteries. Thereafter, he teamed up with the Spartans. It's alleged he slept with one of the two Spartan queens—the Spartans had a dual kingship—so that his descendants would become kings of Sparta, as he facetiously put it.

- ❖ Later still, the Athenians forgave him and he was recalled. However, even later, he was once again driven into exile again. He turned up for the last time before the Battle of Aegospotami, the final naval battle of the Peloponnesian War, when he tried to give advice to the Athenians.
- ❖ Alcibiades's career, with all its ups and down, reveals a great deal about the mesmerizing power of the aristocracy in democratic Athens in the final decades of the 5th century BC. Though leading politicians didn't exclusively come from the top social level after the death of Pericles, Athens was unable to shake off its love affair with wealth and the wealthy.

Suggested Reading

Davies, *Wealth and the Power of Wealth in Classical Athens*.

De Romilly, "Alcibiades."

_____, "Cleon."

Garland, *Celebrity in Antiquity*.

Questions to Consider

1. Was Athens well served by its political leaders?
2. Apart from Pericles, which Athenian politician is most deserving of your attention, and why?

*The Brutality of
Athenian Democracy*

This lecture examines three case histories that demonstrate the capacity of Athenian democracy for brutality. The first involves the cold-blooded massacre of a neutral people, the second involves the trial and execution of several Athenian generals for treason, and the third involves the trial and condemnation of the philosopher Socrates. They are all connected with the Peloponnesian War.



MELOS

- ❖ In 416 BC, Alcibiades recommended that the Athenians conquer the small island of Melos off the southeast coast of Peloponnese. This was a Spartan colony that had remained neutral during the war. It was tiny compared to Athens, having perhaps 3,000 citizens. Athens attacked with a force of 3,000 fighters and 38 triremes.
- ❖ The Athenians were technically at peace with the Spartans at this time, but they believed the entire Aegean region was their territory. According to Thucydides, they sent ambassadors to Melos. The two sides weighed the pros and cons of Melian resistance versus submission. The exchange is known as the Melian Dialogue.
- ❖ Most, if not all, of the debate is probably an invention because Thucydides was in exile and the Melians were massacred. It's possible Thucydides may have talked to a Melian woman who survived.

- ❖ The basis of the Athenian argument was that only self-interest mattered in international affairs. They were strong, they would do as they wished. The Melians, by contrast, appealed to justice and human decency. This was met with scorn by the Athenians.
- ❖ The Athenians claimed it was no disgrace to submit to the greatest city in Greece. The Melians said they were not going to give up their freedom. Soon after, the Athenians began besieging the Melians, who received no help from the Spartans. In the end, the Melians surrendered.
- ❖ The entire male population was massacred and the Athenians sold the women and children into slavery. Afterward, the Athenians sent 500 people to settle the island themselves. That form of brutal retribution was called *andrapodismos*. It was regularly carried out after a siege.
- ❖ The Athenian Demos voted for the attack, but surely, some of them must have been horrified by it. One person who certainly was horrified was the tragic poet Euripides. His play *The Trojan Women* is clearly intended to be a denunciation of Athens's willingness to commit genocide, even though it's set in the timeless past after the fall of Troy.

EXECUTION OF GENERALS

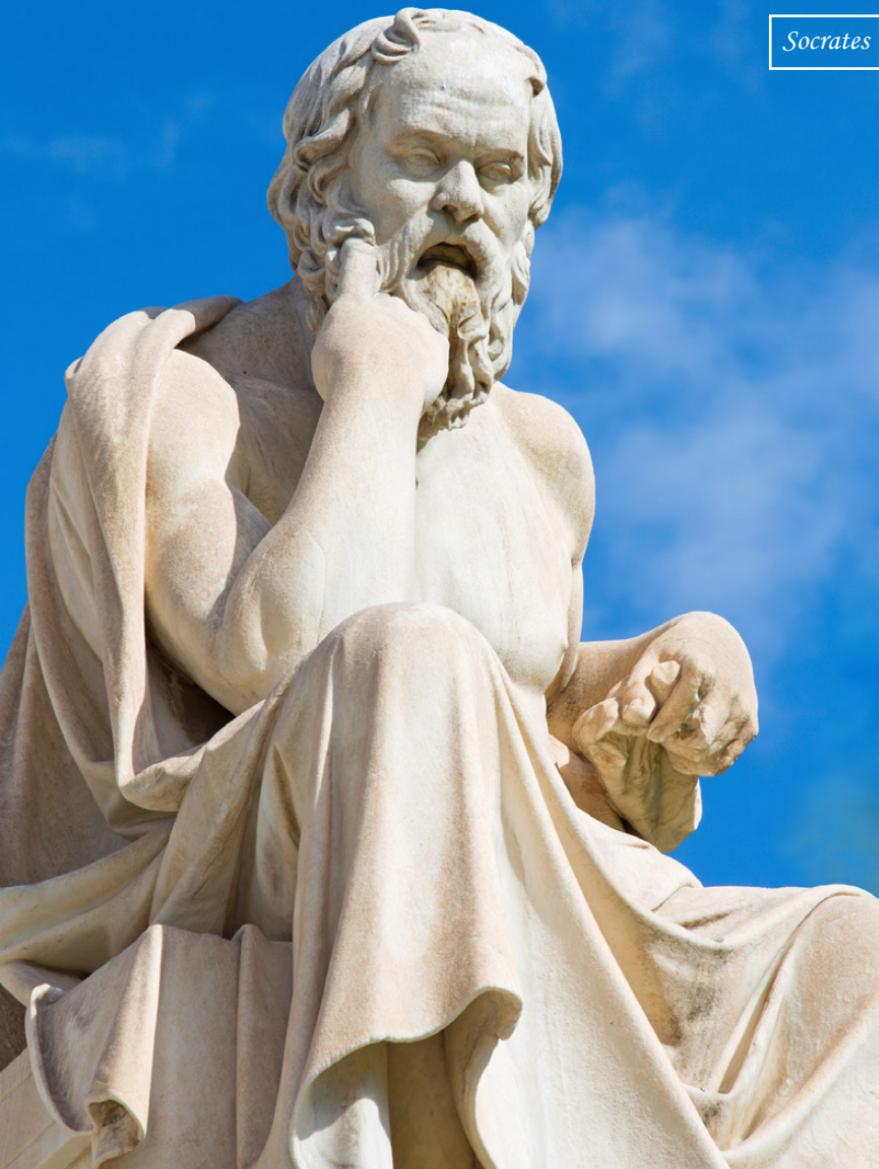
- ❖ This lecture's second incident involves a travesty of justice in 406 BC, a decade after the Melos massacre and two years from the end of the Peloponnesian War. The Demos had just built a new fleet and manned it with all able-bodied souls it could muster, including metics and slaves.
- ❖ Off the Arginusae islands, close to the coast of modern-day Turkey, they defeated the Peloponnesian navy. The Demos was ecstatic when it learned the news and voted to give citizenship to the metics and slaves who served as sailors. However, immediately afterward, a storm struck. It prevented the generals from rescuing thousands of their shipwrecked companions.

- ❖ The generals were also admirals. They were all expected to command land forces and sea forces. Eight of the 10 Athenian generals were directing the battle. When the Demos learned from a later dispatch that thousands had drowned, it became apoplectic with anger. A bitter debate took place in the Ecclesia, according to the records of the mercenary officer and historian Xenophon. He was a pro-Spartan oligarch.
- ❖ The debate seems to have gone fairly well for the generals. They were able to blame the storm, which had made it impossible, they claimed, for them to rescue the sailors. However, the next day was a religious festival, and this had the effect of reminding the Athenians how many men had been lost.
- ❖ When the Assembly met again, a much harsher line was adopted. Six of the eight generals were found guilty of treason and executed. The other two had fled rather than return to Athens for trial.
- ❖ In executing the six generals, the Demos acted rashly, vindictively and unconstitutionally. It acted unconstitutionally because the generals were tried en bloc, an illegal procedure. Some Athenians likely regretted the decision because they later condemned to death the instigators of the decision. However, the instigators fled before their executions.

SOCRATES

- ❖ Socrates held a powerful post in the Assembly on the day of the second meeting, when the Demos voted on whether or not to find the generals guilty. He refused to put the motion to commit the generals to trial to vote, but he was overruled. His own execution six or seven years later is generally regarded as the worst crime of Athenian democracy.
- ❖ The charges that Socrates faced were corrupting the youth and not acknowledging the gods the state acknowledged. Because the second charge came under the heading of impiety and was a crime against the gods, the prosecution demanded the death penalty. Socrates's real offense was likely espousing unpopular views.

Socrates



- ❖ Alcibiades was a close associate, if not friend, of Socrates, and it was certainly due to that association that Socrates was charged with corrupting the young. Another prominent young aristocrat whom Socrates supposedly corrupted was Plato's relative Critias. As for the religious charge, Socrates was accused of both disregarding state gods and worshipping his own.
- ❖ Plato reports that Socrates could have fled if he so chose. However, he chose to stay and face the charges, declaring himself bound by the laws. He drank hemlock—the regular way of conducting an execution—and took his own life.

ASSESSMENT

- ❖ Socrates's trial and execution puzzles historians to this day. One problem is that the two main sources are Xenophon and Plato, both of whom were Socrates's pupils and therefore possibly biased.
- ❖ Socrates tested the democracy by baiting it. It took the bait and acted impetuously and recklessly. That was a flaw that lay at the heart of the democracy: It acted without thinking through the full consequences of its decision, in this case of its judgment. This was very likely an example of crowd hysteria. To make amends, the restored democracy later introduced measures to protect itself from rash decisions in the future.

Suggested Reading

Bosworth, "The Humanitarian Aspect of the Melian Dialogue."

Herman, *Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens*.

Mara, "Thucydides and Political Thought."

Questions to Consider

1. Is there any evidence to suggest that states with democratic governments adhere to a higher moral standard than those operating under other forms of government?
2. Which, in your view, was the worst crime committed by the Athenian democracy?

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Athenian Defeat in Sicily

This lecture discusses the biggest defeat in Athenian history, one that happened at the hands of another democracy. In many ways, this defeat was due to structural faults in the Athenian democratic system. Democracy is not the most effective way of running a war, and that was certainly the case in Athens.

There were three main structural weaknesses. First, the Athenian military did not have the equivalent of a commander in chief. Instead, it had 10 generals of equal rank, meaning majority decisions sometimes left the minority rankled. The second weakness was that a general could at any time be recalled, relieved of his office, fined, or expelled by the Demos. This led to extremely cautious choices by generals looking to protect their jobs.

The third weakness was that it was the right of the Demos to vote on matters to do with war, while it was the duty of generals to carry out its wish, whether or not they agreed with it. This could lead to a general waging a war for which he had no appetite. All of these weaknesses became fatal as in the final, tragic chapter of the Peloponnesian War.

THE DECISION TO INVADE

- ❖ In 415 BC, Athens launched an expeditionary force to conquer the island of Sicily. They decided to send 100 triremes—too small a force—and three generals with equal power: Nicias and Alcibiades, two heavy hitters, and a lightweight called Lamachus.
- ❖ However, before they'd set sail, two scandals erupted in Athens: the mutilation of sacred stone objects called herms and the parodying of the Eleusinian Mysteries (which were religious rites). Alcibiades's biographer claims that his political opponents induced witnesses to claim falsely that he was involved in both crimes.
- ❖ Alcibiades was charged with impiety. He wanted to stand trial before the expedition sailed and said he would do so on pain of death. The Demos, acting under the influence of his enemies, decided that the trial should be postponed and that he should be recalled later to face the charges. This was one of the worst decisions the Demos ever made—sending one of its generals off to Sicily under a cloud.

THE EXPEDITION

- ❖ The expedition sets sail from the Piraeus, the port of Athens, around the middle of the summer of 415 BC. Athens supplied 100 ships and her allies another 34. When the expeditionary force landed in Sicily, each general produced a different plan of campaign.
- ❖ Nicias proposed that they should make a show of strength to Syracuse and then quickly return home—a halfhearted, lackluster strategy. Lamachus proposed an immediate assault on Syracuse. This was the most aggressive and clearly the best plan.
- ❖ Alcibiades recommended that they win over as many Sicilian cities as possible and then attack the enemies of Segesta, which were Selinus and Syracuse. Alcibiades won out because Nicias had no intention of adopting Lamachus's plan. In other words, the second best proposal was adopted.



ALCIBIADES AND SPARTA

- ❖ A few months at most after the expedition had arrived, an Athenian ship arrived to take Alcibiades and others back to Athens to face charges of impiety. His enemies had taken advantage of his absence to prepare for a conviction. He managed to escape, fled to Sparta, and was condemned in absentia. He then began colluding with the Spartans.
- ❖ He recommended that the Spartans establish a base inside Attica at a place called Decelea, which could serve as a refuge for runaway slaves. Some 20,000 Athenian slaves fled there, we're told. He also recommended that the Spartans should send a military advisor, Gylippus, to Syracuse. These two recommendations had a tremendous impact on both the Peloponnesian War and the Sicilian expedition.
- ❖ There were now two remaining generals, Nicias and Lamachus. Both were committed to a strategy—the one proposed by Alcibiades—that they did not endorse. Nicias assumed sole command because

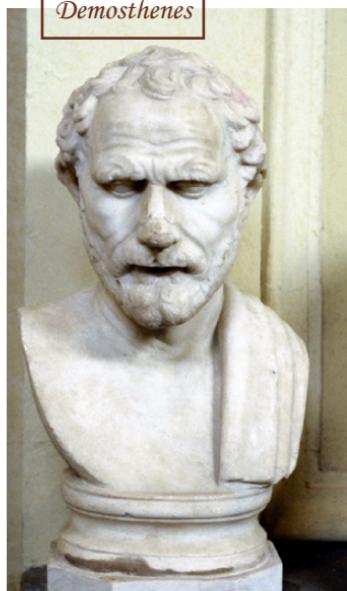
he was more experienced than Lamachus, and the situation very quickly went downhill.

- ❖ Eventually, after trying without much success to drum up support from other Sicilian cities, the Athenians began blockading Syracuse. Lamachus was killed. Gylippus broke the blockade of Syracuse, whereupon Nicias wrote a letter to Assembly urging the Demos either to sanction his withdrawal or to send more troops.

ARGUMENTS OVER STRATEGY

- ❖ Nicias likely would have preferred the Demos to sanction his withdrawal. Instead, it sent another fleet under a general called Demosthenes. At first, after the arrival of reinforcements, things went well, but then a direct assault on Syracuse failed. Consequently, Demosthenes urged withdrawal but Nicias resisted. He resisted because he was afraid of being prosecuted for incompetence by the Athenian Demos.
- ❖ Before long, his army became weakened by sickness. In the end, Nicias had no option but to concede that the only course of action was to withdraw. Then, on August 27, 413, an eclipse of moon took place. Some read this as a sign the withdrawal should be delayed. Nicias, on advice from his soothsayers, delayed the withdrawal for 21 days.
- ❖ Predictably, it was a disastrous decision. In that time, the Syracusans were able to contain the Athenian fleet in the Great Harbor so that it couldn't sail off. Eventually, the Athenians tried to escape over land in hope of reaching a place hostile to Syracuse. Nicias was at the head, Demosthenes at the rear.

Demosthenes





FINAL DEFEAT

- ❖ Demosthenes was caught first and surrendered. Two days later, the Syracusans caught up with Nicias. The Athenians were so exhausted by this point that they scarcely put up any resistance. Against the wishes of Gylippus, Nicias and Demosthenes were both executed.
- ❖ One historical account says 40,000 Athenians had tried to escape by land and that 7,000 were taken prisoner. The rest were butchered. This doesn't include those who perished at sea. In 414, immediately after the expedition's failure, Sparta resumed hostilities. Persia now began to assist Sparta by contributing with money.
- ❖ Athens, meanwhile, was prevented from minting silver coins because the Spartans were occupying a fort inside Attica called Decelea, from which they could raid the countryside. The occupation of Decelea meant that the Athenians were denied the use of their silver mines at Lavrion. At the same time, a number of Athens's allies revolted. The Sicilian expedition had been a disaster.

Suggested Reading

Connor, *Thucydides* (book 6).

Kagan, *The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition*.

Questions to Consider

1. To what extent was Athens's failure in Sicily due to Athens's democratic constitution?
2. To what extent was it due to poor generalship?

19

Suspension, Restoration, and Termination

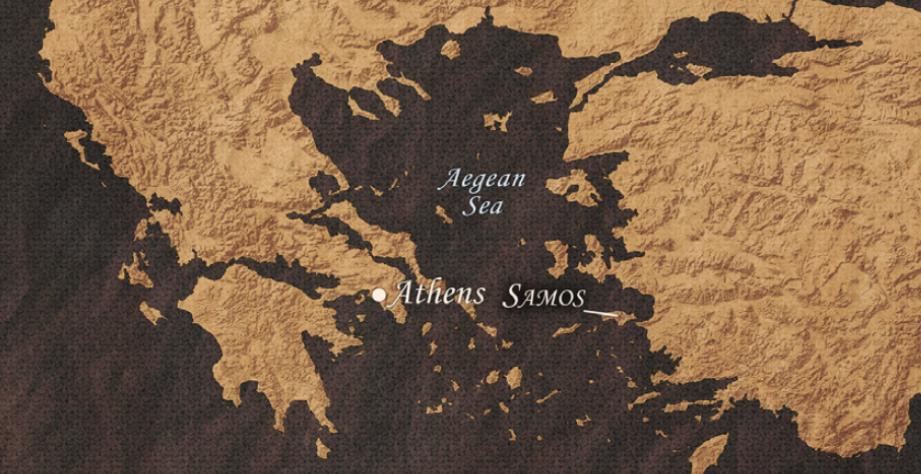
The previous lecture saw the Athenians in dire straits. They had suffered the greatest defeat in their history. They had no money and no fleet, and were facing a widespread revolt among their allies. As a result of their fear, the Athenians put their noses to the grindstone, as Thucydides grudgingly noted and this lecture shows.

DRASTIC MEASURES

- ❖ In 413 BC, following the failure of the Sicilian expedition, the Demos appointed a board of 10 *probouloī*, one from each tribe. Their minimum age was probably 40, and one of them was the tragedian Sophocles. It was their job to offer advice as the situation required. Another measure was the suspension of the Council of 500.
- ❖ There was a widening gap between oligarchs and democrats. There had always been an undercurrent of discontent, a closet faction of oligarchical-minded Athenians who met in dark corners and spoke in whispers of the days before Athens had become a radical democracy.
- ❖ Now, they were emboldened to speak openly of their disenchantment with democracy. They did so as a result of the failure of the Sicilian expedition, for which they held the Demos responsible.

THE 400 AND THE 5,000

- ❖ The *probouloī* remained in charge for about two years, exercising a steady hand on Athenian politics. Then, in 411, a meeting of the Assembly took place outside city walls, which only those who could afford hoplite armor were permitted to attend. Radical democracy was suspended and an oligarchic government was set up. It was known as the 400, not to be confused with the Council of 500, or Boule, which prepared the agenda for the Assembly.
- ❖ The coup succeeded because Athens was broke, and the oligarchs argued that Athens needed the help of Persia to continue the war. The only way they could get Persia to help was if they changed their constitution, as Persia was hostile to democracy, being itself an autocracy.
- ❖ The other reason why the coup succeeded is that Athens's fleet was stationed off the island of Samos, just off the coast of modern-day Turkey, at the time. It could do nothing to prevent the takeover, which it doubtless would have done if it had been stationed in the Piraeus. The rowers in the fleet were the staunchest advocates of



democracy because they were the poorest, and they were the ones who benefited most from state pay.

- ❖ In fact, the 400 remained in power for only four months because the rowers remained loyal to democracy. In the end, the only thing the 400 did in an effort to convert Athens into an oligarchy was to suspend pay both for jurors and for political services. They didn't go so far as to suspend pay for service in the military.
- ❖ In September of 411, the 400 were ejected. For the next eight months, until June of 410, Athens was ruled by moderate oligarchs—the so-called 5,000. There were around 9,000 Athenian hoplites at this date, so the 5,000 constituted just over half of the hoplite class. The 5,000 combined democracy with oligarchy. After eight months, the 5,000 voluntarily abrogated their powers, pending a return to full democracy.

PROBLEMS REMAIN

- ❖ In June of 410, full democracy was restored. Over the next five years, Athens won a number of victories, largely due to Alcibiades, who had been recalled and reinstated as general. Then, in 405, Athens suffered a catastrophic and final defeat at a place called Aegospotami, just off the coast of northwestern Turkey. Only about 20 ships survived from a fleet of 180.

- ❖ The general, Conon, fled to Cyprus rather than face prosecution back in Athens. All of the allies, with the single exception of the island of Samos, revolted. The hardline democrats, however, refused to bow. A politician called Cleophon passed a resolution to the effect that any Athenian who suggested making peace should be exiled.
- ❖ Athens, without a fleet, was blockaded, and its population was starving. Eventually, another politician called Theramenes negotiated terms of surrender with Sparta, and Cleophon was executed. The Demos surrendered in 404. The island of Samos fought on a bit longer.
- ❖ Incidentally, no formal peace agreement between Sparta and Athens was ever concluded. In fact, it wasn't until March of 1996, or 2,400 years after Athens surrendered, that Athens and Sparta finally signed a declaration pledging ties between the two cities.
- ❖ In the aftermath of the war, Athens was permitted to retain only 12 triremes. The city walls were torn down, but the Athenians themselves were spared. The Spartans spared Athens because they calculated that the city would provide a check to Sparta's allies should they prove troublesome, which they soon did.

THE THIRTY TYRANTS

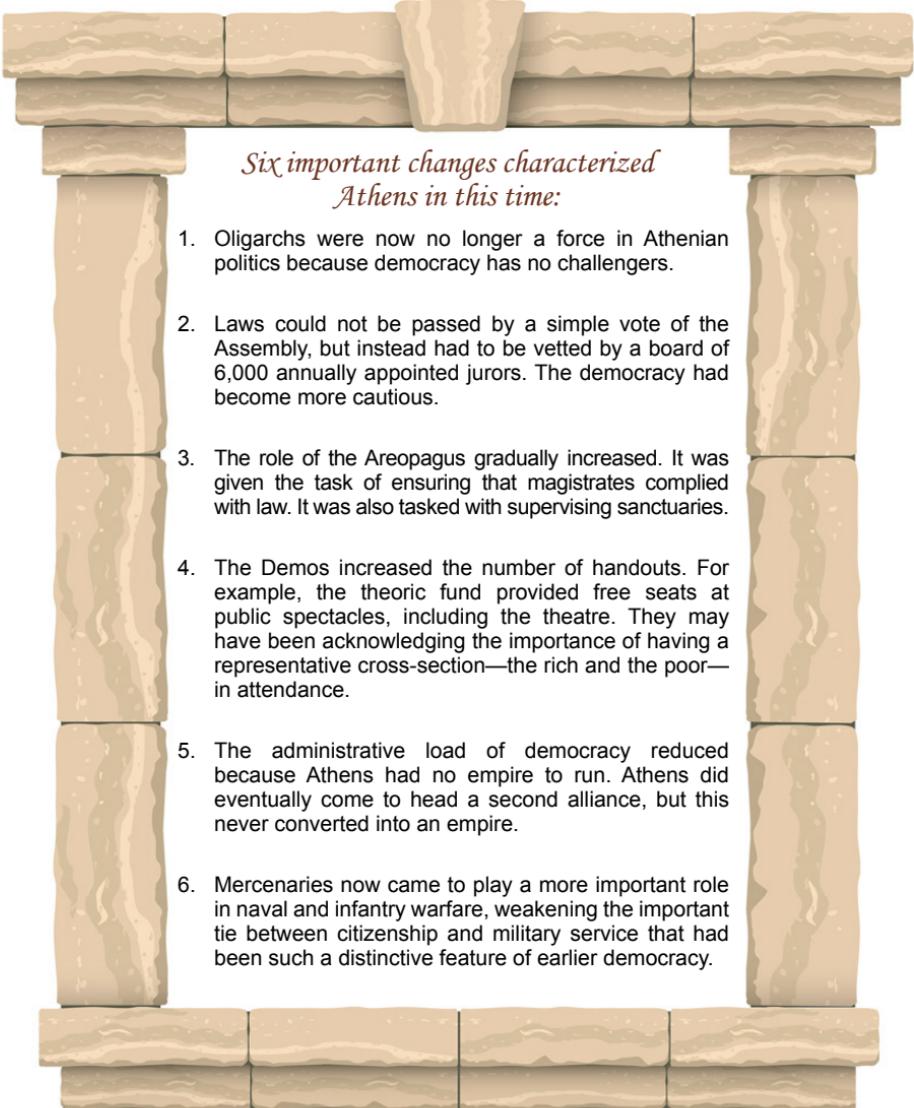
- ❖ In summer of 404, a Spartan-backed oligarchy dubbed by ancient historians as the Thirty Tyrants took over. It did so with the support and connivance of Lysander, a Spartan admiral, who kept a garrison at hand manned by former Spartan slaves.
- ❖ Sparta had a mixed constitution. It had two kings, a council of 30 men over the age of 60 known as the *gerousia*, and an assembly known as the *apella*. Political theorists looked upon it approvingly as a mixture of monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy.
- ❖ Sparta always did what it could to reduce the spread of democracy. It distrusted democracy because it distrusted change and innovation, which it equated with political turmoil. The Peloponnesian League, which it headed, was composed of oligarchies, with just two exceptions in Elis and Mantinea.

- ❖ The slogan of the Thirty Tyrants was the restoration of Athens's "ancestral constitution." It was a bogus claim. Their rule was proposed in the Assembly by a man named Dracontides, and 30 men were appointed to direct affairs of state and draft a new constitution on "ancient" lines.
- ❖ They did not draft a new constitution. They repealed laws passed by Ephialtes, disbanded the popular courts, and began revising the legal code. The right to attend the Assembly was limited to 3,000. The 30 men in power used 300 whip bearers to enforce their will. Athens had become a police state.
- ❖ The writer I. F. Stone described Critias, the leader of the tyrants, as a cruel and brutal man who was "determined to remake the city according to his own anti-democratic mold whatever the human cost." This reign of terror lasted for eight months.
- ❖ Theramenes, who had been active in establishing the 400, was one of the Thirty Tyrants. He was a moderate, however, by comparison with the other 29. Critias forced him to drink hemlock for not being sufficiently extreme. Under the rule of the Thirty Tyrants, 1,500 citizens were killed, plus 1,000 metics. In addition, 5,000 people were exiled, and private property was seized.
- ❖ Before long, however, resistance grew. Civil war broke out, with exiled democrats establishing themselves in the Piraeus, Athens's port. A battle took place there, which saw the democrats defeat the forces of the Thirty Tyrants. Critias fell in the battle.
- ❖ Sympathizers of the Thirty Tyrants ultimately set up a separate polity in Eleusis, the town that was home to the Eleusinian Mysteries, some 13 miles west of Athens. The democrats invited oligarchs to conference, and then they killed them.

DEMOCRACY RETURNS

- ❖ In 403 BC, a restoration of full democracy was brought about. Amnesty for all, except for the Thirty Tyrants and their henchman, was implemented. Athens was reunited.

- ❖ The general consensus among scholars is that Athenian democracy reached its final phase of evolution in the 4th century BC.



Six important changes characterized Athens in this time:

1. Oligarchs were now no longer a force in Athenian politics because democracy has no challengers.
2. Laws could not be passed by a simple vote of the Assembly, but instead had to be vetted by a board of 6,000 annually appointed jurors. The democracy had become more cautious.
3. The role of the Areopagus gradually increased. It was given the task of ensuring that magistrates complied with law. It was also tasked with supervising sanctuaries.
4. The Demos increased the number of handouts. For example, the theoric fund provided free seats at public spectacles, including the theatre. They may have been acknowledging the importance of having a representative cross-section—the rich and the poor—in attendance.
5. The administrative load of democracy reduced because Athens had no empire to run. Athens did eventually come to head a second alliance, but this never converted into an empire.
6. Mercenaries now came to play a more important role in naval and infantry warfare, weakening the important tie between citizenship and military service that had been such a distinctive feature of earlier democracy.

- ❖ Athenian democracy proved to be less than wholly efficient in waging the Peloponnesian War. It proved equally, if not more, incompetent in facing the challenge posed by Philip II of Macedon.
- ❖ The last 30 years of the democracy were largely consumed with debates over the rising power of Macedon under Philip II, who came to the throne in 359. In 20 years, he transformed Macedon into the greatest military power in the Greek world.
- ❖ This was the period when the great orator Demosthenes and his rival Aeschines clashed over what policy to adopt. Demosthenes advocated a vigorous anti-Macedon policy, and Aeschines urged compliance. Eventually, Demosthenes won the hearts and minds of the Athenian people, and Athens led a coalition of Greek states versus Philip II. It was defeated in 338 at Chaeronea.

FALLING ACTIONS

- ❖ Eighteen months later, on the motion of Eucrates, the Athenians passed a law declaring firm opposition against tyranny. The opposition between democracy and tyranny is ideologically central to the very definition of democracy.
- ❖ From 336 to 322/1 BC, Athens was largely under the control of one man, rather as it had been nearly a century earlier when Pericles had been at the helm. That man was a blue-blooded aristocrat called Lycurgus.
- ❖ Lycurgus held the position of chief financial officer. It was an elected position, but Lycurgus wielded more power in this role than anyone had before him. Lycurgus's greatest achievement was to ensure that Athens was adequately supplied with imported grain.
- ❖ When Philip II's son Alexander the Great died in Babylon in 323, the Athenians thought that Macedon was finished. Following the lead of Demosthenes, the Athenians staged a revolt versus Macedonian rule both by sea and by land. They again had a huge fleet.

- ❖ About 20 Greek states joined them in what was called the Lamian War (323–322 BC), but Macedon, under its regent Antipater, was victorious. After the death of Alexander the Great, Antipater took charge of the whole empire in the name of Alexander's son Alexander IV.
- ❖ After the revolt had been crushed, Demosthenes, guessing that the Macedonians would send a hit man after him, took his own life by swallowing poison. Antipater didn't, however, abolish Athens's democracy as such. He was much subtler than that. He introduced a minimum property qualification of 2,000 drachmas for an Athenian to be eligible for citizenship.
- ❖ That was the equivalent of having three years' income in the bank. It meant that at least one-third of the citizen body was removed from the roster. In addition, the Athenians had to accept a Macedonian garrison. In effect, Athens was now a managed oligarchy. The year 322 BC was the end of the road for Athenian independence and democracy.

Suggested Reading

Hansen, *The Athenian Assembly in the Age of Demosthenes*.

Herman, *Stability and Crisis in the Athenian Democracy*.

Krentz, *The Thirty at Athens*.

Shear, *Polis and Revolution: Responding to Oligarchy in Classical Athens*.

Questions to Consider

1. Would Athens have been better governed by an oligarchy?
2. Was the Athenian democracy justified in executing Socrates?

20

The Democratic Theater

This lecture focuses on events at the Theater of Dionysus, which was located on the southern side of the Acropolis. (The present-day version is from Roman times.) The original theater featured wooden seating and space where the chorus sang and danced, made of beaten earth. From 500 BC onward, tragedies, comedies, and satyr plays were performed here.



Theater of Dionysus

THE INSTITUTION OF THE THEATER

- ❖ The theater was a civic institution because the state supervised it, controlled it, and organized the financing of it. Athens' allies were permitted to attend the principal drama festival, the City Dionysia. There was another drama festival, the Lenaea, from which they were excluded. From the middle of the 5th century BC, the City Dionysia staged a public presentation of the tribute collected from the allies.
- ❖ The Athenians recognized three genres of drama and kept them strictly separate. The two main genres were tragedy and comedy. The third was the satyr play, a kind of farce that followed a trilogy of tragic plays. It takes its name from the fact that it dealt with the antics of satyrs. Satyrs were half-human and half-animal creatures whose drunken antics provided a lighthearted antidote to the seriousness of tragedy.

- ❖ Playwrights who wanted to have their plays performed first had to submit their work to the archon basileus and the eponymous archon for consideration. If successful, a wealthy citizen would be appointed to finance the production. This was one of the liturgies, or services to the state, financed by wealthy Athenians.
- ❖ One estimate puts the number of Athenians who were involved in the staging of plays at the City Dionysia at around 1,500. Some of those involved, perhaps a considerable number, are likely to have been women, who would probably have made the costumes and perhaps the masks.
- ❖ Drama formed part of two festivals: the City Dionysia, held in March and April, and the Lenaea, held in January and February. That meant Athenians could only indulge their taste for drama twice a year.



PERSONNEL

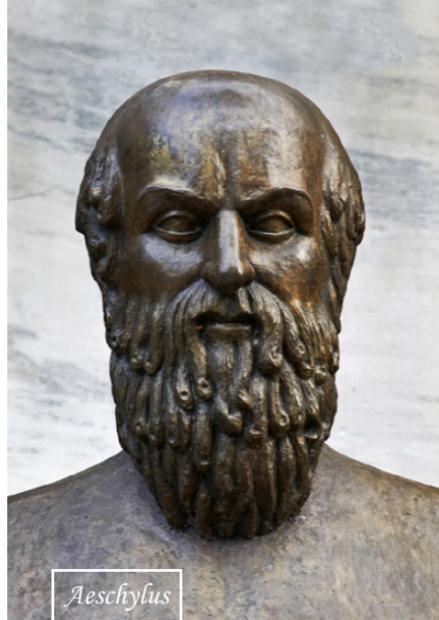
- ❖ All actors were male. The chief actor was called the protagonist, the second was called the deuteragonist, and the third was called the tritagonist. Each actor in a tragedy had to play as many as three parts because three actors was the limit. To accomplish this, actors wore masks.
- ❖ Choruses accompanied the actors. There were 17 choruses for the tragic, satyric, and comic plays at both the City Dionysia and the Lenaean, adding up to 34 in all. In the case of comedy, the chorus could be either human, as in the production *Knights*; or animal, as in *Wasps*; or a natural phenomenon, as in *Clouds*.
- ❖ The chorus danced to an aulos, which was an instrument that produced a sound rather like an oboe. It was their role to provide commentary on the action and occasional advice, without knowing how things would turn out.
- ❖ The Theater of Dionysus accommodated, at a conservative estimate, between 14,000 and 17,000 people. Tragedians were required to write three tragedies and one satyr play. Comic dramatists only wrote one play each. All in all, the productions added up to four solid days of theater, each beginning at dawn.

PERSIANS

- ❖ The lecture now turns to three tragedies, which in different ways reveal something about Athenian democracy. The first is *Persians* by Aeschylus. Its subject is the Persian defeat at Salamis in 480 BC. At first sight, it looks as if the playwright is celebrating the virtues of democracy over autocracy.
- ❖ A Persian messenger gives a description of the Greek naval victory to a Persian court. The early lines are stirring, but eventually, the messenger describes in detail how the Athenians hacked at sailors struggling in the water. It's a reminder of what civilized people, including democratic people, are capable of doing in war.

ORESTEIA

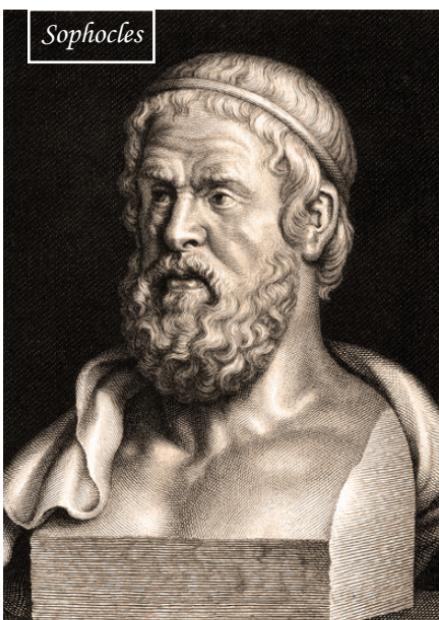
- ❖ Another dramatic offering was *Oresteia*, also by Aeschylus and the only surviving Greek trilogy. *Oresteia* takes its name from the Greek hero Orestes. In the first play of the trilogy Agamemnon, the commander of the Greek army, is murdered on his return from Troy by his wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus.
- ❖ In the second part of the trilogy, Orestes avenges his father's death by murdering his mother and her lover, after which he is plagued by the Furies, demonic spirits that pursue him relentlessly. In the final part of the trilogy, Orestes goes to Delphi to seek purification for his crime.
- ❖ Purification, however, is not enough. He needs to stand trial and be judged as well. He heads for Athens, where on the Areopagus, the goddess Athena establishes the first court in the land. The Furies are the prosecutors and Apollo speaks for the defense.
- ❖ Orestes was only doing what was right, Apollo claims. When it comes to voting, the jury of Athenians in the play is divided right down the middle. Athena steps in and casts her vote on behalf of the accused, who is declared innocent.
- ❖ After presenting how trial by jury first arose in Athens, Aeschylus now shifts the audience's attention to the consequences of a not-guilty verdict. The injured party, the Furies, are apoplectic with rage. They threaten to wreak revenge on Athens for dishonoring them.
- ❖ Once again, Athena steps in to resolve the crisis. She offers a compromise. She says that they will have a home in Athens and be



venerated because they are necessary in the just city. They will act as guardians of justice, rather than as instruments of vengeance. Henceforth, murder will be determined by due process, not by a revenge killing. The Furies accept the offer and are transformed into the Eumenides, which means the “Kindly Ones.”

ANTIGONE

- ❖ This lecture’s third tragedy is *Antigone* by Sophocles. It’s likely that it was written when Pericles was at the helm because the figure of Creon, the king of Thebes, seems to be based on Pericles. Creon is depicted as an inflexible leader who pushes through an unpopular measure in defiance of public sentiment.
- ❖ Creon refuses burial to his nephew, Polyneices, because Polyneices led an ill-fated attempt to wrest the throne of Thebes from his brother, Eteocles. Polyneices’s sister, Antigone, considers Creon’s action an outrage. She sprinkles earth over her brother’s corpse, pours a libation, and then gets arrested.
- ❖ Creon condemns her to death. Before this happens, however, a debate takes place between Creon and his son, Haemon, who is betrothed to Antigone. Creon argues that the situation calls for firmness and that nothing is worse than when anarchy is let loose on the land. Haemon tells his father that the citizens are displeased with his decision and that it’s important to be flexible.
- ❖ Haemon accuses his father of disrespecting the gods, which makes Creon so incensed that



he threatens to execute Antigone in his son's presence. Haemon storms off, declaring his father will never set eyes on him again.

- ❖ This kind of set-piece argument was very popular in Greek tragedy. It evoked the world of the Assembly and the lawcourts. In this instance, reason gives way to passion.

ARISTOPHANES'S COMEDIES

- ❖ The lecture now turns to the comedies of the poet Aristophanes, focusing particularly on Old Comedy. It was set in the present day and dealt with contemporary issues. It also contained a great deal of ribald and scatological humor. A regular feature of Old Comedy is the ordinary citizen who somehow manages to change the political situation.
- ❖ Only 11 comic plays by Aristophanes have survived. He wrote from the mid-420s to the 380s BC. Three of the plays—*The Acharnians*, *Women at the Ecclesia*, and *Women at the Thesmophoria*—parody meetings of the Assembly.
- ❖ It isn't only the Assembly that is represented in various ways. *Wasps* depicts the trial of a dog that has been accused of theft. It's called *Wasps* because the chorus comprises waspish jurors.
- ❖ One element in the plot structure of Old Comedy, called the *parabasis*, was used by the poet as an opportunity to harangue the audience without any reference to the play. The chorus leader speaks in the poet's voice by stepping out of his role. In the play *Frogs*, for instance, the poet urges reconciliation between democrats and oligarchs. It was produced in 405, when Athens was in political crisis just before the end of the Peloponnesian War.

THE JUDGES

- ❖ The Athenian theater was an outlet for competitiveness between the playwrights and their sponsors, the *chorégoi*. The three playwrights (and their sponsors) who produced tragedies and satyr plays, and

the three playwrights (and their sponsors) who produced comedies all competed for first, second, and third prize.

- ❖ Ten judges were chosen by lot, one from each of the 10 tribes, and it was they who cast their votes. No one knows what criteria they actually judged the plays on.
- ❖ Another strange feature is that only some tallies were selected. Perhaps as many as half may have been discarded. This was presumably to avoid bribery, though one could perhaps argue that it was also leaving part of the judgment to the god Dionysus, in whose honor the festival was celebrated.

Suggested Reading

Aristophanes, *Acharnians, Knights, and Peace*.

Cartledge, *Aristophanes and His Theatre of the Absurd*.

Sidwell, *Aristophanes the Democrat*.

Questions to Consider

1. Does theater have a duty to educate the citizen body?
2. How important is it for theater today to address political and social issues?

21

Law and Order under Democracy

Athenian democracy was based on two essential principles: the right of every citizen to participate fully in the decision-making process and the right to be judged by a jury of his peers. This lecture looks at the way in which the popular courts functioned. Note: Scholars know much more about due process and how a trial took place than they do about crimes and criminals themselves. Most evidence comes from forensic speeches written on behalf of well-to-do clients.

KEEPING ORDER

- ❖ The Athenians didn't have a police force or detectives. No Greek state did, and neither did the Romans. In Athens, the Scythian archers were primarily in the business of keeping order, but they didn't have the power to arrest anyone. This must have been extremely difficult for victims of violent crime, especially if they happened to be frail or elderly.
- ❖ If the injured party was physically incapable of apprehending the guilty party and did not have any friends or relatives to stand in for him or her, she or he had the right to summon a magistrate, who would then make an arrest on their behalf. In practice, however, this was probably fairly unusual. It must have been difficult to convince a magistrate of a party's guilt without witnesses. In the case of a wrongful arrest, the wrongful party was liable for a fine of 1,000 drachmas.
- ❖ Greek society depended on a level of community engagement in upholding the law and apprehending criminals. So far as scholars can tell, it worked.



THE COURTS

- ❖ In the Athenian legal system, ordinary citizens were both juror and judge. For simplicity, this lecture will refer to them as jurors. After the reforms spearheaded by Ephialtes and Pericles in 462/1 BC that stripped the Areopagus of many of its powers, most cases were heard by the *dikastēria* (the jury courts).
- ❖ The Athenian legal system featured limited distinction between criminal and civil law. There were no lawyers, though some prosecutors profited from successful prosecutions by earning rewards. If a prosecutor failed to secure one-fifth of the votes, he was fined.

- ❖ Only basic cross-examination was allowed at first, and then it was banned from the 370s BC onward. Instead, depositions from witnesses were read in court. No physical evidence, such as murder weapons, was presented, and the accused could be tried in *absentia*.
- ❖ Courts were located in Agora. Juries were very large—sometimes as many as 500 or 501 people, and always in the hundreds. The idea was that large juries would be more difficult to bribe.
- ❖ Each year, 6,000 *dikasts* (jurors) were chosen by lot from all who applied. This panel was called the *hēliaia*. The minimum age to become a juror was 30. Pay of two obols was introduced in the 450s BC, and raised to three obols by Cleon in the 420s BC.

ARRAIGNMENT

- ❖ A person accused of a crime would receive a written summons naming the day they, along with the plaintiff, had to appear before one of the nine archons. Both parties had to swear a solemn oath—the plaintiff that their charge was genuine, and the defendant pleading innocence or admitting guilt.
- ❖ If the archon decided that the charge should come to trial, he assigned the case to a particular court on a particular date. Other than in the case of theft, murder, rape, and adultery, the accused would be able to walk freely and go about their business until the day of the trial.
- ❖ People who turned up to serve as jurors on any given day were not guaranteed a place on the bench. There was a special allotment machine that determined at random who should serve on any particular jury. Each juror had a bronze token, and the machine determined whether he was selected or not. This meant it was impossible to bribe jurors beforehand.
- ❖ A magistrate, one of the archons, was the court president. Each of the nine archons presided over cases of a specific sort. The king archon, for instance, presided over religious cases involving impiety. The

president didn't give advice to the jury, so he couldn't influence the verdict. He just kept order and supervised the technical side of the trial.

PROCEDURES

- ❖ Each trial took a single day at most, i.e., 9 or 10 hours. Many would have been much shorter. The plaintiff always spoke first, followed by the defendant. Parties could hire speechwriters, but they had to deliver the speeches themselves. The plaintiff and defendant each received the exact same amount of time to speak, measured by a device known as a *klepsudra*, which functioned by draining water from one cup to another over a set amount of time.
- ❖ After the plaintiff and defendant had both delivered their speeches, the jury didn't retire to deliberate and appoint a foreman. They voted instantaneously by secret ballot. Then, the votes were counted in the presence of the prosecutor and the defendant. A simple majority decided the verdict. If the vote turned out to be even, the accused was acquitted.
- ❖ If a guilty verdict was returned, the plaintiff and defendant each took turns to recommend a punishment, with the plaintiff again speaking first. Obviously, the plaintiff would recommend a more severe punishment than the now-convicted person. The convicted would typically try to recommend a more lenient punishment, but not so lenient that the jury would choose the more severe punishment.



- ❖ Sentencing took place immediately, again without any deliberation. Most penalties were pecuniary. Long-term imprisonment wasn't an option: The Greeks didn't have the manpower to support a prison system, nor did they want to support criminals at public cost. The usual punishments were fines or, in extreme cases, banishment.
- ❖ Execution, as in Socrates's case, was extremely rare. There was a prison in the agora. Socrates was held there, but only while he was awaiting execution.
- ❖ Some important changes took place in legal procedure in the 4th century BC under the restored democracy. The most important was that arbitration became increasingly common for settlement of private disputes. Arbitrators were chosen by lot from men aged 59, i.e., men in the last year that they were eligible for military service. No doubt this was considered a great honor, reserved for Athenians who had demonstrated integrity and good judgement throughout their lives.

PROS AND CONS

- ❖ This lecture ends with an assessment of the Athenian court system, balancing the pros against the cons. First up are the cons. Some sources, like Aristophanes, suggest the courts demonstrated a bias against the wealthy, viewing the jury system as a way to get back at the wealthy through fines. Whether that was true or not is unknown.
- ❖ The system surely favored practiced orators. For example, a peasant farmer with no public speaking experience would have been at a disadvantage when facing a jury of 200 or more.
- ❖ Another flaw was that women did not have the same access to the courts that men did. A woman had to be represented in court by a man, even though the speech was delivered in the first person if it was a written speech. Also note that rhetoric, rather than hard evidence, played a disproportionate part in the proceedings.

- ❖ Politically motivated cases were another unfortunate feature. Finally, because the system required an instant verdict, there was no time for mature reflection on matters.
- ❖ Despite the flaws, the Athenian system had some redeeming features. It was straightforward, transparent, and simple. It was swift, with every judgment being delivered the same day. Jury tampering was virtually impossible, and the vote was secret. It's likely that most penalties were proportionate, and there were provisions for deterring worthless lawsuits.

Suggested Reading

Hansen, *The Sovereignty of the People's Court in Athens*.

Lanni, *Law and Justice in the Courts of Classical Athens*.

Saxonhouse, *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*.

Stone, *The Trial of Socrates*.

Wilson, *The Death of Socrates: Hero, Villain, Chatterbox, Saint*.

Questions to Consider

1. How might the Athenians have improved their legal system?
2. Are there any ways in which it is superior to our legal system?

22

Ancient Critics of Athenian Democracy

This lecture takes a look at critics of Athenian democracy during its time. The government produced a fairly stable society for a long period of time, and most Athenians—at least the citizens—were likely happy with it. However, the majority of Athenians didn't write things down for posterity. This presents an anomaly: Scholars know of almost no one living at the time of Athenian democracy that had anything good to say about it.

HERODOTUS

- ❖ The historian Herodotus included a famous debate in his work, known as *History*. The record of the debate depicts three Persians arguing about the best type of constitution in the year 522 BC. These three, along with four other conspirators, had just killed a pretender to the Persian throne, and they wanted to install the best form of government.
- ❖ Monarchy had been the rule in Persia up until then, but apparently they were open to other options. (Note: Though someone may have told Herodotus about the debate, this debate is fabricated.) Each of the three speakers touted the values of a different system of government—first democracy, then oligarchy, and then monarchy.
- ❖ The first to speak was Otanes, and he railed against monarchy while favoring democracy. After Otanes had spoken, a Persian called Megabyzus argued in favor of oligarchy. Finally, Darius lauded the virtues of monarchy. At the end of Darius's speech, Otanes said he recognized the way the debate had gone, did not wish to be ruled, and would depart. The remaining people agreed to install a monarchy, and Darius became king.
- ❖ Herodotus didn't pass any judgment on the debate. Elsewhere in his *History*, however, he passed a mixed verdict on democracy. In one place, he recounted that Athenians under the control of a tyrant were deliberately inefficient, but acted energetically once they achieved liberty. On another occasion, he wrote that it was much easier to persuade 30,000 Athenian citizens to go to war than to persuade a single citizen in oligarchical Sparta.

TRAGEDY

- ❖ Praise of democracy occasionally occurred in tragedy. One of most celebrated is a comment by the chorus of Persian elders in *The Persians*, written by Aeschylus. When the Persian queen Atossa asks who is the shepherd of the Athenian people, the chorus responds, "They are slaves of no man and do not listen to one person."

- ❖ It's worth keeping the context in mind. The play is about Athens's naval victory over the Persians at Salamis, so there's likely to be the occasional piece of nationalist sentiment popping up.

PLATO'S *PROTAGORAS*

- ❖ Arguably the most sustained defense of Athenian democracy from antiquity is a speech given by the sophist Protagoras in Plato's dialogue of that name. Protagoras claims that Zeus distributed a sense of justice and a sense of shame to all men equally. Hence, the Athenians are right to listen to anyone in the Assembly because a sense of justice and of shame are necessary skills for living in a city.
- ❖ Socrates and his pupil Plato hated sophists, which raises suspicions about this remark. Sure enough, Socrates weighs in and challenges Protagoras's assumption. He ultimately gets Protagoras to admit that these qualities do not belong to every man and must be taught. Therefore, democracy is a bad thing.
- ❖ In real life, Protagoras drafted a democratic constitution for the Athenian colony of Thurii in Italy. It's not altogether unlikely that he might have delivered the kind of speech that Plato put into his mouth. If he did, it hasn't survived, and all scholars are left to go with is Socrates's dismissive rebuttal.

THUCYDIDES

- ❖ It's very difficult not to view both the Peloponnesian War and Athenian democracy through the eyes of Thucydides. He was a major witness from the outbreak of the war in 431 to 411 BC, when his *History of the Peloponnesian War* breaks off.
- ❖ Pericles, who is sometimes seen as his mouthpiece, was highly contemptuous of the masses. When the Demos berates Pericles for the woes they're suffering because of his policy of abandoning Attica and retreating inside the city walls, Pericles scorns them and refuses to woo them.

- ❖ One of most striking condemnations of democracy in Thucydides's work is put into the mouth of the traitor Alcibiades. He describes democracy as "a generally acknowledged folly." Note that Thucydides was writing for an elite audience, and it's not clear how many Athenians would have shared his opinion.

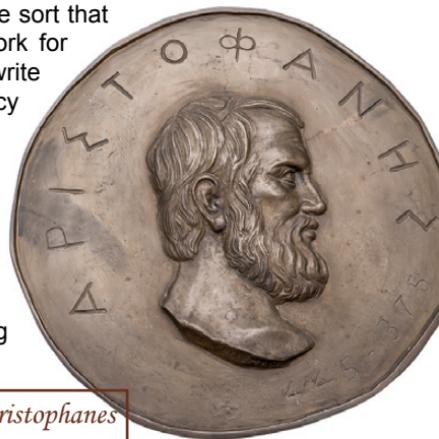
THE OLD OLIGARCH

- ❖ Another source of criticism is a short pamphlet written by an anonymous opponent of democracy, generally entitled the *Old Oligarch*. The author is referred to as Pseudo-Xenophon because the pamphlet was found in writings by Xenophon, though it's not thought to be by him.
- ❖ The author mounts an artificial defense of democracy in a way that exposes its greed and selfishness. He points out that the poor—i.e., rowers—have more power than the rich, because Athens's power depends on the rowers. His point is that the supporters of democracy have devised a very clever system that works very well for themselves.
- ❖ Note that he never suggests the overthrow of democracy in favor of oligarchy. He's content to fulminate from the sidelines as a passive bystander. It's possible the pamphlet was intended to serve as a rhetorical exercise of the sort that the sophists might set as homework for their students, i.e., asking them to write a justification of Athenian democracy from an oligarchic standpoint.

ARISTOPHANES

- ❖ The comic dramatist Aristophanes produced works inspired by contemporary events and living people. He had an ongoing feud with the politician Cleon,

Aristophanes



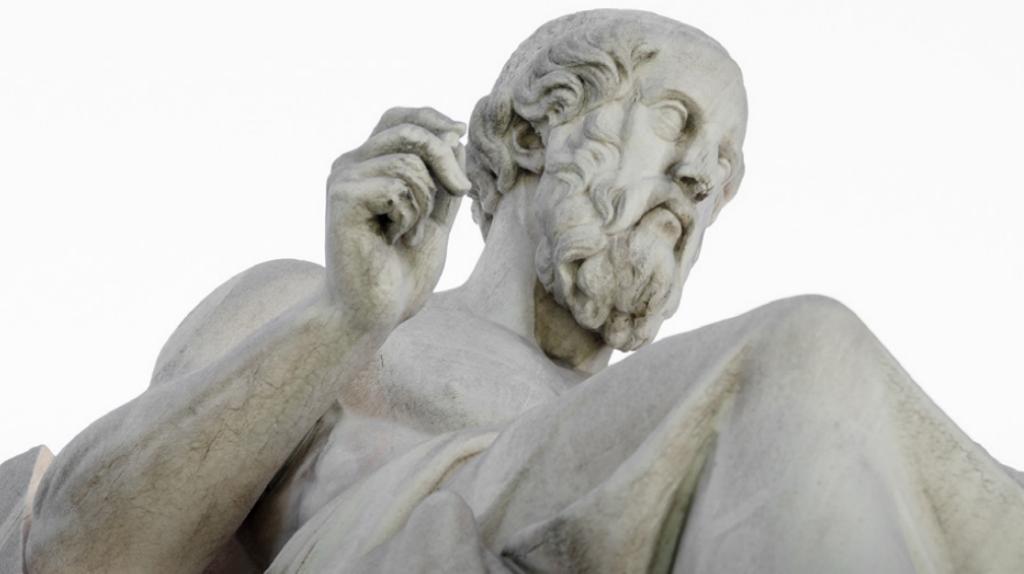
who impeached Aristophanes for his anti-patriotic portrayal of Athenians in *Babylonians*.

- ❖ In turn Aristophanes mocked Cleon in *Knights*, where he depicts him as a Paphlagonian slave. As the villain of the piece, he bamboozles an elderly man who is the unflattering personification of the Demos. In other works, Aristophanes seemed to question the point of the Peloponnesian War, and he was also critical of the jury system.
- ❖ Note that Aristophanes was primarily in the business of making his audience laugh. Scholars should be wary of drawing any conclusion about his political affiliation from his plays. In some regards, his work is similar to that of modern-day late-night TV hosts, who use humor to make serious criticisms of politicians.

PLATO

- ❖ The philosopher Plato had a jaundiced view of democracy because of the execution of Socrates. It's also clear that he had no confidence in the common man. He uses Socrates as his mouthpiece in almost all his major dialogues.

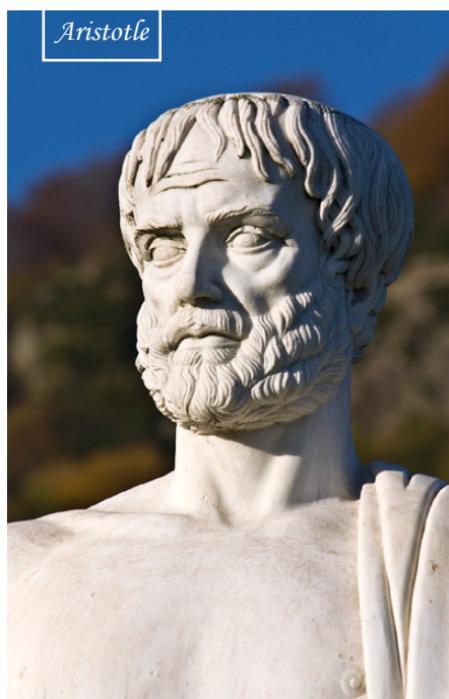
Plato



- ❖ In *Gorgias*, Socrates argues that even the great political figures of the past—Miltiades, Themistocles, and Pericles—weren't true statesmen because they had sought to gratify the Demos with ships and walls and dockyards.
- ❖ Additionally, scenes in the *Republic* depict the weaknesses of democracy by showing a boat whose crew fights among themselves, plying the boat owner with drink and causing him to lose consciousness. Meanwhile, the ideal steersman just looks up at the stars and refuses to get engaged.
- ❖ There's also an image of the Demos as a beast that cannot be controlled by its trainer, who allows it to do whatever it wants, whether good or bad. Plato's hostility toward democracy has drawn heavy criticism from modern scholars.

ARISTOTLE

- ❖ Aristotle wasn't a friend of democracy either. He wasn't an Athenian, but he lived in Athens and established his school of philosophy there. In his *Politics*, he uses the word *démokratia* for the bad kind of rule by the people, whereas he uses the word *politeia* for the good kind of popular rule.
- ❖ In the seventh book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he argues that citizens shouldn't be artisans, traders, or farmers. In part, his argument is that leisure is essential for developing virtue. It follows that the independent mind is a luxury that only the wealthy can afford.



STRENGTH OF OPPOSITION

- ❖ There are always political dissenters in any society. The relevant question here is: Was there a subversive element among the Athenian population that would have welcomed the overthrow of democracy and its replacement by an oligarchic constitution?
- ❖ The answer seems to be no, at least not until around the last decade of the 5th century BC, when democracy was suspended in 411 and 404. However, it was never thereafter suspended until the Macedonians effectively abolished it. At other times, that subversive element probably limited its disgust for democracy to symposia and to the philosophical schools, where anything could be said.
- ❖ The only critic of democracy who ever attracted much attention in Athens was Socrates, and that was only because he was alleged to have been instrumental in encouraging Critias and the Thirty Tyrants to seize power. Largely, the impact of democracy's critics was minimal.

Suggested Reading

Monoson, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements*.

Ober, "How to Criticize Democracy in Late-Fifth-Century and Fourth-Century Athens." Roberts, "The First Attacks on Athenian Democracy."

Saxonhouse, *Athenian Democracy*.

Questions to Consider

1. Were Athens's critics correct in their judgement of her democracy? Is it reckless to trust the judgement of ordinary citizens?
2. How might Athens have improved its democracy?

23

Post-Athenian Democracies

This lecture traces the history of democracy from the time of Athens's loss of freedom down to modern times. It won't be an unbroken history, but it does focus on the highlights and talks about how democracy caught on as essentially a new idea in the 17th century.

AFTER ATHENS

- ❖ There was a long gap between 322 BC, when democracy took a nosedive throughout the Greek world, and the birth of liberal democracy in modern times. However, there were some societies that practiced something akin to democracy.
- ❖ The Battle of Chaeronea, which resulted in the defeat of Athens and Thebes at the hands of Philip II of Macedon, signaled the death of Greek freedom. The Greek states didn't realize it at the time, however, so they continued to agitate, but their efforts to regain their freedom proved ineffectual.
- ❖ The author H. M. Jones has posited that democracy was actually favored by monarchs in the Hellenistic period. This was the period following the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC, when Alexander's empire was divided into three huge chunks, one based in Macedon (modern-day northern Greece), another in Egypt, and the third in Syria/Turkey.
- ❖ However, if there is some truth to that, it certainly wasn't the same kind of radical democracy that Athens had once practiced. No polis in this period was allowed to have a foreign policy. Still, the Greek city-states in the Hellenistic period could pass laws and run their domestic affairs unsupervised.

ROMAN DEMOCRACY

- ❖ During the Roman Republic and even during the imperial period, the Romans had a democracy of sorts, in the sense that ordinary people had a say in the state. One of the problems for democracy under the Romans, however, was that the citizen population was far too large to meet as a single body.
- ❖ Roman territory covered not just Rome but the whole of the peninsula of Italy in the 1st century BC. From 212 AD onward, by a decree of Emperor Caracalla, the empire contained citizens from Britannia in the northwest to the northern coast of Africa. The empire

also stretched to the borders of Germany in the north and Armenia in the east. Citizens living in far-reaching areas likely had little or no democratic voice.

- ❖ There were three types of assemblies in Rome. The most important was the *centuriate* assembly, which met to elect the highest magistrates and to decide whether or not to declare war. It consisted of 193 centuries, into which the whole citizen body was divided. Each century cast only one vote. In effect, the centuries were distributed according to wealth.
- ❖ Over half of the 193 were reserved for the wealthiest, whereas the poor were squeezed into just four. To make matters still less democratic, the centuries reserved for the wealthy voted first. Once a majority of centuries had voted either in favor or in opposition to the proposal, the election was suspended. Very often, therefore, the poor didn't ever get the chance to cast their vote.

LATER DEVELOPMENTS

- ❖ The oldest legislature that is still in existence is the Icelandic Althing, founded in 930 AD. Though at first only the most powerful men in the land were permitted to address it, eventually commoners were permitted to attend.
- ❖ The Magna Carta, which King John of England signed in 1215 under pressure from his barons, is often regarded as the founding charter of Western democracy. In fact, it merely limited the power of the king in relation to the barons. However, the early American colonists took the Magna Carta as a founding charter for their claim to liberty from the British crown. It remains a document of immense importance in establishing the rights of the individual over arbitrary authority.
- ❖ In 1293, something akin to democracy was established in northern Italy, in the city of Florence. Rich merchants, whose prosperity derived from wool and a thriving international banking industry, established what they called a republic as the result of a bloodless coup.

King John signing the Magna Carta



- ❖ The Ordinances of Justice enfranchised all males who owned property, paid taxes, and had matriculated from one of the 12 guilds; the most important guild was comprised of wool merchants. As a result, some 5,000 Florentines acquired the right to vote, to be elected by lot to the *Signoria* (Council), and to hold the highest office in the land. It was under this system of government that the Renaissance took root and flourished in Florence in the 14th and 15th centuries.

THE EXECUTION OF KING CHARLES I

- ❖ Democracy didn't experience a true rebirth anywhere in Europe until the 17th century. Its first appearance was in England in the time of the war fought between the Cavaliers, the supporters of King Charles I, and the Roundheads, the supporters of Parliament, under Oliver Cromwell.

- ❖ Many thousands of people died in this war, including the king, who was executed in 1649. Parliament now acquired many of the powers that had previously belonged to the king, even though England remained a monarchy with the accession of Charles II.
- ❖ A generation later, the so-called Glorious Revolution led to the overthrow of the Catholic king James II in favor of William, prince of Orange, and Mary, James's daughter, both of whom were Protestants. Once again, the monarchy lost ground. Some would claim that it was in 1688, the year of the Glorious Revolution, that parliamentary democracy was born.

The following year, Parliament passed the country's Bill of Rights, which established regular elections and guaranteed freedom of speech. This was one of the inspirations for the American Bill of Rights, including the right to bear arms.



King Charles I

AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

- ❖ Once the American colonists had won their independence from the British in 1783, their first task was to establish a constitution to replace the role of the British Parliament. This they achieved in 1789. The overthrow of a monarchic system of government that had been favored by the aristocracy led to a desire to establish a democracy.
- ❖ The Founding Fathers were more influenced by the Roman republican system of government than they were by Athenian democracy. Regardless, it's still instructive to compare the American and Athenian systems. According to both systems, government is for the people and government exists to serve the people.

- ❖ One very big difference between the two democracies, however, is the tension between the federal government and states' rights in the American system. No such tension existed in the Athenian democracy because Attica wasn't divided into states. Additionally, Athenian democracy didn't struggle with what many Americans see as a serious contradiction between the popular vote and the Electoral College. There was only the popular vote.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

- ❖ The French Revolution in 1789 swept away the country's monarchy and the feudal system that had supported it. It established in its place a republic. The seeds of the revolution were sown when King Louis XVI permitted the summoning of an assembly known as the Estates General for the first time since 1614.
- ❖ There were three estates, the upper two reserved for the aristocracy and clergy and the third for the commoners. The problem was that the commoners represented 98 percent of the population, and the other two estates could easily outvote them.
- ❖ The third estate broke away from the other two and set itself up as the National Assembly. Rioting followed, along with the storming of the Bastille, the event that marked the beginning of the revolution. During the 10-month Reign of Terror in 1793–1794, the guillotine executed thousands.
- ❖ Yet it was the French Revolution that established the principles of liberty, fraternity, and equality, and which, more than any other event, set Western Europe on the path of liberal democracy. A further step toward democracy was taken in the year 1848, which saw a wave of political uprisings throughout Europe in support of a plethora of rights, such as freedom of the press and freedom of assembly.

OTHER MOVEMENTS

- ❖ In Britain, the so-called Great Reform Act of 1832 nearly doubled the electorate from 366,000 to over 650,000. Still, only those owning

property—about 18 percent of adult males—had the right to vote. Women, as well as most of the working classes, were still excluded, and there was no secret ballot.

- ❖ In 1838, Chartists, who mainly came from the working class, drew up a charter calling for six democratic reforms. One reform was voting rights for non-property-owning men. The petition was presented to Parliament, but rejected.
- ❖ It wasn't until 1918 that all men obtained the vote in Britain, whereas women had to wait 10 more years until all of them could vote. In the United States, the 15th Amendment first gave non-white men the right to vote in 1870. The 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote in 1920.

MODERN JUDGMENTS

- ❖ From the 17th century onwards, Athenian democracy has had at best a mixed reception among both theorists and revolutionaries. The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes was a virulent critic. John Locke, who advocated the entitlement of the individual to life, liberty, and property, was equally dismissive of the common man.
- ❖ The Federalists were no lovers of the common man either. In the ninth of the *Federalist Papers*, Alexander Hamilton wrote, "It is impossible to read the history of the petty republics of Greece ... without feeling sensations of horror and disgust at the distractions with which they were continually agitated." To sum up, most arguments against Athenian democracy take the view that participatory democracy is always likely to create unruliness and chaos.
- ❖ There is, however, another intellectual tradition of venerating Athenian democracy and seeking to copy it. George Grote, author of a 12-volume history of ancient Greece, wrote:

Democracy in Grecian antiquity possessed the privilege, not only of kindling an earnest and unanimous attachment to the constitution in the bosoms of the citizens, but also of creating

an energy of public and private action such as could never be obtained under an oligarchy.

- ❖ Contemporary historians such as Donald Kagan and Cynthia Farrar have also written praise of Athenian democracy. This praise of Athenian democracy remains on the theoretical level. Given the size of modern democracies, it's virtually inconceivable that anything on Athenian lines could be introduced.

THE ATHENIANS AND AMERICA

- ❖ Four basic points will wrap up this lecture. First, though other parts of the world than Greece had democratic tendencies, nowhere else featured anything remotely like the degree of power that was vested in the ordinary man.
- ❖ Second, there are those who claim that Athenian democracy wasn't really a democracy because women and slaves were excluded. However, women in the United States didn't acquire the right to vote until 1920, and America can hardly cast the first stone regarding slavery. Slaves in the United States weren't freed until the 1860s, and the civil rights movement took place a century later.
- ❖ Third, Athens was by no means the only democracy in Greek world. However, Athenians were far more politically engaged than people in other groups that practiced democracy.
- ❖ Fourth, the American democracy is not the heir of the Athenian system of government. No present-day democracy is. Athenian democracy was an evolutionary dead end, at least as far as its practical application is concerned. As its echoes into the present show, however, it wasn't a cultural dead end.

Suggested Reading

Roberts, "Athenian Democracy in the Age of Revolutions."

Robinson, *The First Democracies*.

Questions to Consider

1. Which democracy, past or present, comes closest to replicating Athenian democracy?
2. Could American democracy be improved in any way?

24

Democracy Today, Democracy Tomorrow

It's impossible to talk about Athenian democracy without glancing at the state of modern democracies. That's the goal of this concluding lecture.

MODERN DEMOCRACIES

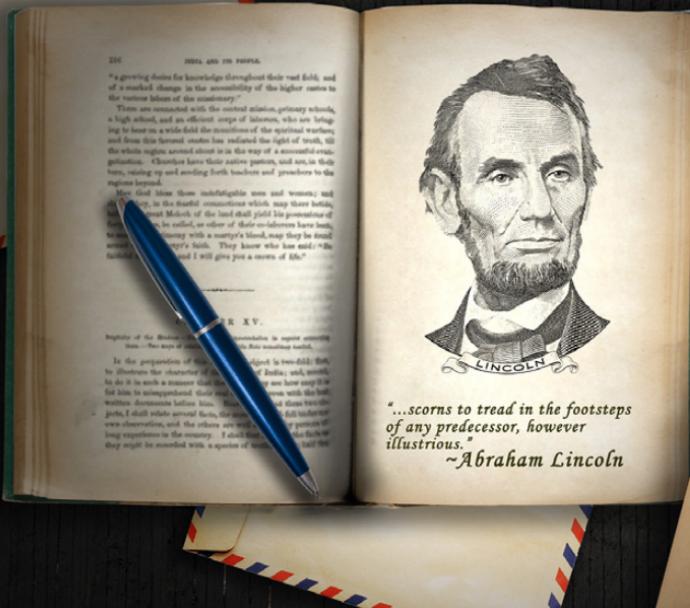
- ❖ Well over half the countries in the world today are categorized as democracies. It may be tempting to think of a future world full of peacefully coexisting democracies, but for multiple reasons, we shouldn't hold our breath. To begin with, many of the countries that call themselves democracies today simply aren't democracies. Examples include the People's Republic of China and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
- ❖ Leaving aside the modern problem of defining what is and isn't a democracy, virtually no democracy exists today on the model of Athenian democracy. The single exception is the *Landsgemeinde* (cantonal assemblies) that operate in Switzerland. Majority rule operates in a system of direct democracy, and voting by all eligible citizens takes place by a show of hands.
- ❖ An important question is: What are the criteria by which democracy today should be judged? There are various indexes, but any society that claims to be democratic should hold free and fair elections, permit freedom of expression, protect human rights, and observe rule of law.
- ❖ The Economist Intelligence Unit, which is a wing of the *Economist* magazine, uses a variety of other criteria. These include economic prosperity, gender equality, education, and environmental viability. Democracy is a gradient, and even those societies that would qualify as democracies by the aforementioned criteria are not all equally democratic.
- ❖ Incidentally, the Economist Intelligence Unit downgraded the United States to a "flawed democracy" in January 2017, reflecting the drop in confidence in government institutions by US citizens. In fact, confidence in the US government has been declining since the 1960s, according to Pew Research. In addition, economic inequality has been on the rise during the same period, according to Goldman Sachs.

DEMOCRACY'S SUPPORTERS

- ❖ In the contemporary world, several aspects of society support democracy. For example, the internet permits free flow of information, which is bad news for totalitarian regimes.
- ❖ Another factor is social media, which permits people to communicate easily with one another. A fearless free press that is not under state control and is not cowed by intimidation is a valuable ally of democracy, as are political satirists.

DEMOCRACY'S ENEMIES

- ❖ Democracy also faces a list of enemies, including apathy and a sense of disenfranchisement among the electorate. Another enemy is the domination of technocrats, who are able to exercise tremendous influence through gifts, services, and influence of various kinds.
- ❖ Cyber attacks can cause interference in democratic process, whether to discredit or promote a candidate or to hack into the electoral roll. This is destructive to confidence in democracy itself, whether or not it affects the outcome of an election.
- ❖ The extravagant cost of funding political campaigns severely limits the pool of aspirants to political office. Another problem is the dissemination of so-called alternative facts, designed to make it impossible to determine the truth, coupled with the spread of so-called fake news via the internet.
- ❖ Two more threats come from political leaders undermining the freedom of the press and subverting freedom of expression. Another attacker is religious extremism—bigotry, in short—which seeks to destroy civil society and forces citizens to adopt security measures that undermine the concept of a free society.
- ❖ Another problem is increasing polarization within the electorate. A democracy can only function if there is some consensus both between opposing parties and among the population overall. A final



threat is the appearance of a demagogue consumed with a desire for fame, who, to quote Abraham Lincoln, “scorns to tread in the footsteps of any predecessor, however illustrious.”

VITAL SIGNS

- ❖ The health of democracy changes almost from day to day. The tearing down of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was a hopeful sign, as was the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1991. The 2010–2012 uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa known as the Arab Spring were pro-democracy sparks as well, but the follow-through, especially in the Middle East, has been discouraging.
- ❖ The Arab Spring was originally billed as a great moment for freedom and human rights; it saw popular uprisings in favor of democracy in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Bahrain. However, it faded two years later, and of all those countries, only Tunisia still holds on to democracy.

- ❖ Another hopeful sign is grassroots involvement in the form of popular protest, petitions, and marches. Though cynics might question how much this form of protest achieves, it indicates that democracy is in a good state of health.
- ❖ The vigor of the American press is a good sign as well. Finally, the separation of powers—legislative, judicial, and executive—that lies at the heart of America’s government is the country’s ultimate safeguard of its democracy.

THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

- ❖ A pertinent question is whether or not democracy is fully equipped to deal with the urgent issues of modern times. For example, will it be able to withstand the threat of terrorism—not just the acts themselves, but also the measures to counter them that increase surveillance?
- ❖ Other questions arise, too: Will government by the people, of the people, and for the people be able to compete effectively with more authoritarian regimes? Will it be able to deliver the best outcomes for its citizens? Will it be able to address and overcome huge demographic shifts, climate change, the depletion of our natural resources, and so on?
- ❖ To close, keep in mind that Athenian democracy was a bold experiment based on the belief in the rationality and good sense of the ordinary man. Modern Western democracy is an equally bold experiment based on the belief in the rationality and good sense of the ordinary woman and man. Athenian democracy was also a fragile experiment—just as American democracy is, and indeed, just as any democracy is.

Suggested Reading

Dunn, *Democracy*.

Finley, *Democracy Ancient and Modern*.

Hansen, *The Tradition of Ancient Greek Democracy and Its Importance for Modern Democracy*.

Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*.

Morris and Raaflaub, *Democracy 2500*.

Questions to Consider

1. Should we admire or condemn Athenian democracy?
2. How (if at all) does the study of Athenian democracy assist us in understanding contemporary democracies?

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